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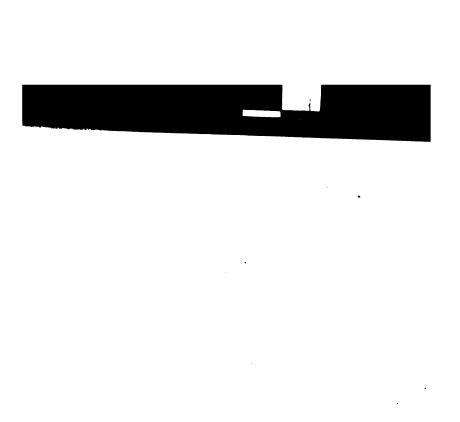


Fiction in ice.





CENT COMME





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SINGING MOUNTAINS ALBERT BENJAMIN CUNNINGHAM



SINGING MOUNTAINS

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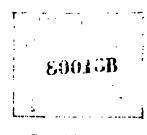
ALBERT BENJAMIN CUNNINGHAM

AUTHOR OF "THE MANSE AT BARREN ROCKS," ETC.

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TO HER WHO LENT THE SCRAP-BOOK, WHO SENT MATERIAL, WHO DREW FROM MEMORY'S TREASURES AS WE SAT OUT UNDER THE BIG MAPLES, WHO WAS EVER A-FIRE FOR THE WONDERFUL OLD TIMES:

______TO MY MOTHER!



CONTENTS

CHAPTER								PAGE
I	The Runaway		•	•	•			13
II	RENEWING ACQUAINTANCES .		•	•	•	•		24
III	On the Hill			•				33
IV	THE END OF THE WORLD .		•	•				54
v	Ат Номе		•					76
VI	The Sharpshooter		•					89
VII	THE WANDERERS		•		•			106
VIII	In the Valley of the Moon	N	•		•			130
XI 🖟	THE ADVENT OF EDITH							159
X	THE GREAT "OUTSIDE"				•	•		185
XI	THE RETURN		•	•	•	•		227
XII	THE CAMP AT BLACK MOUNT	`AI	N		•			239
XIII	BLACK ART							257
XIV	THE SMOKY OPAL			•			•	278
xv	THE PROTRACTED MEETING							287
XVI	DEEP CALLETH UNTO DEEP							301
XVII	BEN AND HENRY			_		_	_	210



SINGING MOUNTAINS



SINGING MOUNTAINS

Chapter 1

THE RUNAWAY

BEN RHODES sat down by the wayside and took off his shoes. Ever since he could remember he had gone barefoot until actual winter drove him to his boots. But at the school he was fleeing, the wearing of shoes had been one of the many intolerable requirements: there, shoes were worn both winter and summer.

But now he took them off and put his bare feet down on the cool ground. His toes burrowed into the mellow earth like the muzzle of a playful puppy. For a time he sat thus, a sense of his new freedom warm within him. Then stringing his shoes over his shoulder, he resumed his journey with the feeling that a better adjustment had been made between him and his world.

Eagerly he took in the old beloved scenes, greeting each one with a mounting joy. Not that he knew these particular mountains, or these identical trees, or these very squirrels and birds. Some of them he had never seen before; others but a time or two. But these mountains and these trees, these birds and these squirrels—they were his!

He was running away in order to get back to them; he



14 Singing Mountains

understood them. They had been his companions always. To him they stood for the old life that was easy and familiar and friendly.

He beheld the mountains, dressed in the red and orange and gold of autumn, and as of old he made believe they were hoary old giants decked for parade, standing there smiling and confident in their power.

A certain warmth and intimacy were given to their magnificence by the life upon them: squirrels chattering their satisfaction, birds flitting from poplar to oak and from low dogwood to high hickory and singing forth their gladness to the beautiful day.

Ben saw it all and he loved it all. This was what he wanted, this open country which he understood. And as he surveyed it a smouldering resentment at the circumscribed life of the school he was fleeing burst into flame and burned hot within him.

"Not for me!" he affirmed aloud, after a habit that was his of talking aloud when alone. "Some things I'll stand, but not that. The books, maybe, but not the shoes and the regular hours. The persimmons getting ripe, and the 'possums!"

But all at once his face paled and his eyes widened. A possible scene that had haunted him ever since he had decided to run away from school, insinuated itself into his consciousness and made him quake. It was as yet purely an imaginary or a potential scene; it had not taken place.

That was the horror of it. Devoutly he wished it had taken place; that it were all over with and he were settled once again into the even life of Barren Rocks. But it was not over, and vividly he saw it as it must be: his father, stern and uncompromising, demanding to know why he had disgraced the family by running away

from school; his mother silent but reproachful; and more intolerable than all else, Henry, dripping ridicule.

And then, gesticulating wildly, impersonating now his father, now his mother and last of all Henry, he enacted the whole affair in all its ghastly details, just as it must soon come to pass.

He lowered his voice to a solemn measured bass that bore a fantastic resemblance to his father's. "Son," the voice said, "I do not understand your conduct. You had an opportunity that was never given to me. Yet you have flung it away and come home!"

"But I had to," Ben responded fiercely. "I couldn't stand it. I couldn't learn the old Latin, and I couldn't go barefooted and there was not a dog anywhere."

Again the deep voice rumbled ominously.

"But you must think of your future. What place can you hold in the world without an education? What do you expect to be when you grow up to manhood?"

"I want to be like Daniel Boone!" This time Ben's voice was desperate. "I want to live out in the woods with my dog and eat squirrels for food."

At this Henry's voice cut in, a voice that mocked and stung with superior ridicule. "But suppose your dog dies with the mange and you can't find any squirrels?" it asked.

"Oh, you shut up," Ben replied wearily.

"But, son, my children must be educated. Our family cannot be ignorant."

At this Ben sat down by the side of the road. His body drooped dejectedly, his whole attitude being that of a martyr willing to die for the mistakes and prejudices of others.

"All right," he declared. "I'll go back. I won't even

ask you to take me to the train. I'll walk. I will get an education, though I am sure it will kill me."

This, as Ben had pictured it, would be the real climax of the scene. After delivering this avowal of sacrifice, he intended to start resolutely down the road.

But he calculated that his father, seeing the lone figure trudging back to school as a result of his own cruelty, should relent. Accordingly when Ben now spoke again for his father, there was a note of sad penitence in his voice.

"Of course, dear boy, I did not mean that you should start back at once. Perhaps I have been needlessly harsh in my treatment of you. Come back, son. Do not leave us in this manner."

But Ben would not return. And at sight of him thus driven away from his own home, his mother should break down and come running after him, the tears streaming down her face.

"O, my boy, you shall not leave me!" Ben's voice was now shaken by emotion. "It would break my heart to have you go." She should take him tenderly by the hand.

But he would break loose from her and stalk on. Then she should turn upon his father with blazing eyes.

"Now see what you have done! To drive my poor boy away from his own home. For shame! I tell you, Peter Rhodes, if he goes I shall go with him."

At this stinging rebuke his father should hurry after the retreating figure. "Forgive me, my child" he should say brokenly. "Only return to us, and you may live your life in your own way."

As Ben uttered these last words a feeling of tenderness for his old father came over him. He would not go back; he would turn about and stay with him in his old age and comfort him.

It was thus that Ben enacted after a fashion he had of dramatizing future events, the scene that he was certain would take place when he should reach home.

For he had been sent from his home in Barren Rocks to the select school in Sisterville; and now, after a lapse of only a few weeks, he was coming back, fleeing the hated school, fleeing it to return to the old Manse under the big chestnut tree by the river.

As he walked on he continued to talk to himself, now uttering strong condemnation of the school, now enacting imaginary conflicts which he anticipated with his old companions when he should be again at Barren Rocks.

Once he went so far as to lay down his shoes and fight a furious round with one of these imaginary companions who had twitted him about being unable to stay away from his mother.

The struggle was a furious one, but in time he got his antagonist flat on his back. Sinking his fingers into his throat, he mauled him mercilessly.

"Say you didn't mean it!" he hissed between his teeth.
"Aw, I didn't mean it, Bennie," a feeble voice answered him.

Ben arose and surveyed the cowed figure sternly. "Then you had better not say it again," he muttered. "I might kill you the next time."

With this gruesome threat he proceeded on his way. Evening approached. The sun poised for a moment on a ridge in the far distance, like a diver preparing for the plunge, then dived into the unplumbed depths beyond. The deep hollows between the hills took on a somber depth. Silence brooded.

Ben glanced at the top of the mountain where the last

amethyst rays of the departed sun still clung like a Halo to the great trees, lighting them with a pale and chastened radiance. But even as he looked the light faded and a dark and somber mystery took its place.

Night arrived—brooding, fathomless, inscrutable night. Overhead a nighthawk cut the air in a vertical swoop for prey, and missing, filled silence with a discordant rasping cry.

From far away the long wolf-howl of a dog rose plaintive and old, sighing into the mysterious darkness a sobbing lamentation. Nearer at hand, a fox hacked to the night.

It was the old spell of the hills.

A nervous shiver passed over Ben. He stepped on a limb that lay in his path and as it broke the sound caused him to jump and quail. His presence was revealed to the night. His flesh crawled. He became more cautious, walking on tip-toes but hurrying breathlessly along.

Vividly there came to his mind the thought that ever arose to haunt him when he was alone in the darkness: Because of the mental association that such a situation should ever arouse in him, arose in his mind thoughts of mad dogs either black or bony and yellow, frothing as they wheeled wildly along. His hair moved fishily over his scalp.

He was filled with a desire to run, to bolt away from it all. But as he ran his terror mounted. He thought he heard an ominous sound just below the road and stopped to listen, holding his breath. But the pounding of his own heart was all he heard.

He proceeded more slowly, peering this way and that. At a bend in the road he looked ahead and saw that which brought him to a dead stop, shivers of terror running up his spine.

A short distance in advance and directly in his path, two pale green eyes regarded him steadily. Not a panther, he reflected, for the glow of a panther's eyes is yellow. This must be a catamount, or a wildcat.

He lost control of his knees. They wabbled under him. As he looked the cat eyes seemed to approach him slowly with a noiseless effort.

He came to his senses. The courage of terror came to him. If he must fight with a catamount, he would do his best. Many uneven stones lay in the path. He stooped and picked up one, two, three. Putting two in his left hand, he hurled the other with his right.

He missed, the stone clattering noisily. But the eyes did not move. He threw another stone. Still they did not move. He approached a little nearer, stone ready; then closer and closer still. Then he gave an exclamation of relief.

"Huh! Fox fire."

He picked up the pieces of decaying wood with the phosphorescent glow and stuck them in his pocket. They would be trophies when he should reach home.

Ahead of him he heard someone whistling. The whistler soon broke into song.

Shady Grove is my little love, Shady Grove, I say; Shady Grove is my little love, Shady Grove far away.

Ben felt a vast relief. The silence that a moment before had been ominous and terrible suddenly became warm and friendly. He lifted his own voice and sang.

> To Shady Grove and my little love, To Shady Grove far away; To Shady Grove and my little love I travel afar to-day.

He waited for a moment listening for an answer. Soon it came. From out the darkness ahead floated the weird question-call of the mountaineer.

"A-way-ee-he-e-e."

"A-way-ee-he-e-e," Ben answered at the top of his voice.

Soon the two were together.

"Who be ye?" the stranger asked.

"Ben Rhodes."

"Son of the parson?"

"Uh-huh."

"Seed him a mite ago."

"You saw father? Where? When?" Ben cried.

"Ridin' by this way a mite ago."

"How long?"

"Not more'n tin minutes, I reckon."

"Was he going home?"

"Yep. He had been over to a buryin' on-"

Without waiting for another word Ben dashed past him. He must overtake his father. Heedless of the terrors about him, he ran wildly on. Reaching the crest of a hill he called at the top of his voice:

"A-way-ee-he-e-e."

But there was no answer. He heard his call echo and reecho from the surrounding hills. A hoot owl from a distant rendezvous filled the night with hoarse jargon. A great tremor shook Ben's chest and issued in a sob. He whimpered as he stumbled on.

"And I missed him! I might have got up behind him and rode home. O, father!"

All his fear of meeting his father was lost in his great disappointment. Once he thought he heard the clatter of the hoofs of a loping horse in the distance, but his call brought no response.

Sadness filled him. Over this road, past these very trees, his father had gone but a few minutes ago. Even now he was somewhere in the distance, headed toward the Old Manse. And here was he, just a little too late.

"And I might have caught him," he whimpered.

But he did not. He ran more, and called again and again, but he was too late. But the thought of his father's nearness drove the terror from his heart.

He came in time to familiar regions. The mountains cleared and Elk river curved as a ribbon of white mist between the tapering hills. The great trees swung in behind, and the roadside was lined with pawpaws. Only by the river bank did the big waterbirch brood over the deeps.

Ben was not afraid now. These places he knew. This was home. He reached the shoals of Elk river that separated him from Barren Rocks. The water flowed black over the rounded stones with a tinkling musical sound. He went to the edge and put a foot in.

The water was warm and comforting, but he drew back. He was filled with a sudden horror of putting his bare foot down on a dreaded moccasin, pinning it to the bottom, and having it swing its blunt head up and fasten on his leg.

But he looked across the river toward home. He strained his eyes and made out the low roof, dark and indefinite in the night. He pictured his father and mother, and even Henry and Little Anne, with a rush of homesickness and plunged into the water.

As he neared the gate, a strange dog stood sentinel and growled menacingly at him. He wondered whose dog it could be; even feared to approach.

"Hello," he called.

There was no answer.

"Hello," he called again.

This time he heard sounds inside. Soon the door was opened and Peter Rhodes stepped out. He had evidently not gone to sleep as yet.

"Hello," he answered.

Ben felt reckless, important.

"Call off your dog and I'll come in," he said cockily.

Peter Rhodes took a step forward, then stopped as if unable to credit his senses. But as he halted there was a movement behind him and Anne Rhodes flew out.

"O, my boy! my boy!" she cried. And wholly delighted that she had him back again she flung her arms about him and hugged him.

"Well, well, well, son," Peter Rhodes said at last, evidently having recovered from his surprise, "how on earth did you get here?"

"Walked," Ben answered importantly.

"Did you walk all the way? Were you not afraid?"

"Afraid? Shucks, there's nothing to be afraid of in such woods as these!"

Peter Rhodes broke into a loud laugh. "What did I tell you, Anne?" he managed at last. "We sent him away too soon. Well, well, well."

Ben drew back, disgusted. With all his fear he had half desired the stern scene he had pictured. It appealed to his sense of the dramatic. At least he had hoped for pained surprise and great disappointment.

But the thing seemed to have been expected, nay even desired. With his disgust came bitterness, bitterness that he had not fled the hated school sooner than he had.

But this bitterness was soon driven from his heart. Within the circle of soft light from the table lamp and the object of Anne Rhodes' tender solicitude, he relaxed easily. . . . He was back home. . . .

The old room was as he had left it: The heavy floor covered but scantily with rag rugs; the walls papered with the Journal and Messenger; the big fireplace now showing the dead ashes of a wood fire, and above it the big squirrel rifle on the wooden pegs!

He settled further in his seat in luxurious happiness. The days ahead were again to be as of old: The hills to wander over and the river to explore in the cut-off, long trips over the traps, and ever at home in the old Baptist Manse.

"I am tired," he yawned sleepily.

"Of course! I will get your things for you," Anne Rhodes answered softly.

Chapter 2

RENEWING ACQUAINTANCES

THE next morning Anne Rhodes was astir very early.

Just a little after dawn broke, and while the sun was still driving back the mist, she went down to the river and from the perforated box that swung from the root of a great sycamore, drew a catfish as blue as the water in which it had lived.

This fish she took to the house, dispatched with a hatpin, and dressed with meticulous care. It was thick enough to cut into comfortable slices. These she rolled in some golden commeal and put in a smoking skillet to fry.

The fragrance arose like a pervasive and irresistible hunger-call and mingling with the rich odor that arose from the great coffee-pot, soon filled all the house.

Henry turned over sleepily, gave an inquiring sniff and roused himself. He saw Ben in the bed beside him, Ben whose arrival in the night he had but drowsily apprehended.

But he did not wake the sleeper. Sniffing again, he arose and dressed. Casting a quick glance over his shoulder as he went toward the door, he calculated that Ben would likely sleep for hours; and entering the living-room to the unmistakable sound of frying fish, he was glad that it should be so.

But Ben opened his eyes. At first the soul that looked forth from them was sulky and rebellious, because for

long he had been accustomed to awake to the dreary round of another day at school. But he soon sensed the difference.

His chest cavity grew warm and pleasant: a feeling of great joy came upon him. The old room with the familiar papering of the walls, the sense of being again at the foot of the hill by the blue river, even the scent of the comfort that covered him, made him give a little shiver of delight and sit up.

He sniffed. There was aroma in the air. It drew him. He found some of his very old clothes hanging on the wall and hurried into them.

A sense of his own importance inflated him. All this early effort was being made for him. In the olden days it was always for Henry; and in those days Ben had been annoyed. But now it was for him! He opened the door and went out.

Peter Rhodes was going out also. "Hello, son," he greeted. "Did you get up this early at school?"

The reference was unfortunate. Ben scowled. "Earlier," he said.

"So you did not like it, eh?" his father continued, his eyes twlinkling.

They had by this time entered the kitchen. It was exceedingly warm and pleasant there. Up on the stove the fish was sputtering in the skillet, browning under the meal; there also the coffee-pot crooned comfortably, and the biscuits baked in the oven.

"No, I didn't like it."

"Ha," Henry jeered, hearing this sourly made remark, "too much learning maketh thee mad."

Ben had a great affection for Henry; his respect for him and for his wisdom was well-nigh unbounded. But just now he could have desired nothing quite so much as



Singing Mountains

26

to annihilate him, simply to cause him to cease being altogether.

"Yes, and I'll make you mad too, if you say much," he flared.

Henry reckoned blithely on his superior age and size. He came closer in a maddening confidential way. "Don't you mind, son. When you get a little age on you——"

"Is that salted enough, Ben?" Anne Rhodes asked, handing him a small bite of fish she had broken from one of the smoking pieces.

He allowed it was satisfactory. Henry gloomed away. Ben's feelings of importance came back to him when, in returning thanks at the breakfast table, Peter Rhodes made reference to the united family. It was a fine thing to be back at home!

Breakfast over, they went into the living room. Solemnly Peter Rhodes took the Bible from the fire-board, leafed through it in a perfect silence, at last found a place that suited him, and began reading.

Ben was not very attentive; his mind wandered with a delightful laziness. But there was something about the words here and there that blended perfectly with his own mood.

... Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle....

For ye shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace. . . . The mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands. . . .

Ben found himself outside. The yard was almost bare of grass, so many feet had trodden it during the summer. The little that fringed the edges was brown and brittle with the autumn.

The big chestnut tree in the corner of the yard was glistering with dew and browning also with the swing of the seasons. Great fat chestnut burs were just beginning to smile and their parting lips revealed the sleek brown nuts within.

Elk river was unchanged. The high bank out in front, the big sycamores and waterbirch, the raft with its peeled logs hugging the shore, the little cut-off, and then the river itself, quiet, blue, mystic—all was as if he had merely closed his eyes and opened them again.

Down a little was the shoal where he had crossed in the night, and just above was Little Creek which wound in and out between the hills, up past the store, on by the school house, and then far away to the fabled spot where the man who had given it its name had been found dead.

And in the right-angle formed by the conjunction of Elk river and Little Creek, was old Buzzard Roost, the ancient stone that had been left standing after the weathering of ages, rising sheer from the waters below and running up to the point where roving Indians had hacked their hieroglyphics in a bygone day.

Buzzard Mountain came next, and above the tops of its pines, the sun now swung, looking like a red-faced jester fairly laughing at the fine day he was making.

There was something wonderful about it all, something leaping, mystic, buoyant. The words he had just listened to within, came back to Ben in broken snatches. . . . The mountains and the hills . . . singing . . . and all the trees . . . clapping their hands!

That was it! The mountains were singing!

All this Ben took in as he stood in the bare yard after his good breakfast that first morning of his return. He swallowed hard as he looked about, seized with a kind of impulsive eagerness that caused him to take a step forward. There was so much to do, so much to see, so much to find out! He started up toward the store.

He found Grouchie McRand there, unchanged. Awkward, surly, dressed in ill-fitting clothes that wrinkled into every curve of his arms and legs, he was sitting on the counter in defiance of the rule against sitting there. He looked up as Ben entered.

"Teedle-ump!" he mouthed disgustedly.

"Teedle-ump?" Ben repeated inquiringly, an ominous glow in his eyes.

"Teedle-ump," Grouchie repeated derisively.

The hour Ben had anticipated the day before, had struck at last. There was no mistaking the contempt and the ridicule in Grouchie's manner. He fairly dripped disdain.

"What do you mean?" Ben wanted to know.

"Learnt everything already?" the other likewise wanted to know.

"I dare you to come out doors," Ben hissed under his breath.

"Teedle-ump!" Grouchie answered without moving. Ben's hand shot out. He seized Grouchie by the foot and pulled him from the counter. He hit the floor with a dull thud. But the storekeeper interfered.

"Boys, git out of here if you want to fight."

About ten minutes later Ben threw out his chest and walked haughtily back down the road. At the same time Grouchie limped painfully toward home. Ben's size had told.

"I tell you," he said to himself, "people will just have to look out for me!"

He went home and slipped quietly into the bedroom. When he came out a little later, he was dressed in his best clothes. Little Anne, his younger sister, noted the change with interest.

"Look, mother," she cried. "Ben is going to see Essie."

Ben looked precisely as if he would like to put his hand over her mouth and quiet her, and not too gently. Instead, he violently disclaimed any thought of going to see Essie.

"Grouchie McRand has been going with her ever since you left," Little Anne hooted at him.

"I'm not afraid of Grouchie McRand," Ben asseverated, but his voice lacked conviction.

"Well, you had better be. Grouchie is as pretty as a picture, and he will have a lot of money some day."

"But he won't get Essie!"

"Thought you didn't care."

"I don't," Ben wailed, stung as ever by her annoying insight into his affairs. "I just wanted to show mother how I looked in my clothes."

Then Little Anne relented. After all, Ben was the member of the household whom she loved most of all. From early days he had been her ally; and now she was determined to be his.

"You look wonderful, Ben," she praised.

"You don't act like it."

"You ought to go and see her, Ben," she kept on, coming toward him with her little winning wheedling ways. "She has got beautiful since you left. Her hair and eyes, and the way she talks. But Grouchie has been down there a lot. I don't think she cares for him, but she might get to, if you keep away."

"I don't care if she does!" But he did not deceive Little Anne. And the fact that he went out and down the bottom belied his words. In truth he was going to see Essie. He had dressed up for this express purpose. Essie Evans had been his girl for years. She had seemed enormously affected by his going away to school, he reflected complacently.

But as he went down the bottom toward her house, he was far from sure of himself. He was troubled as to just what his attitude toward her should be. He was certain she would be glad to see him. No doubt could exist on that point after the way she had bade him good-by when he left for school.

But should he now be swaggering and insolent, or should he be openly glad to see her? That was his problem. There was a voice within him that told him to be exactly what he was: pleased to be back and doubly so to see her. But the idea of swaggering down her way in his new clothes and treating her with haughty condescension appealed to him strongly.

But the question was settled for him. A hundred yards above the house, and before he had made up his mind at all, he saw her. There was a hollow up there, and in the hollow a wonderful spring. Essie was sitting at this spring.

She had on her pink dress. Down her back in a wonderful plait hung her hair, and fastened to the braid was the pink bow he remembered so well.

His heart jumped as he saw her. Her arms were clasped about her knees; and he was sure her expression was dreamy and meditative, so absently did she face the hollow.

"Hello, Essie," he cried, feeling all at once very uncertain.

She turned with a little convulsive start. "Ben!" The word was a little cry both of fright and unbelief.

"I got back last night," he gulped.

"You got back?" she repeated as if she was as yet not really convinced that he stood before her. Then, "You did?" lifting her eyebrows. "I thought you went over there to go to school." There was that in her voice that made him all the more uncertain.

"I didn't like the old school," he floundered. "I didn't like to stay there." He was getting desperate. This thing was turning out differently than he had expected.

"But you ought to have stayed, oughtn't you? It is not always what we like to do that we get to do." Her woman's wisdom was already making its appearance.

Ben was truly flabbergasted. He recalled her wet eyes at his departure a few weeks before; remembered the half whispered promise that she would wait for him. Of course he had counted on a joyous acceptance of the fact of his return. But she now seemed positively disappointed.

All thought of treating her with swaggering condescension left him. But likewise it was impossible to seem openly glad to be back with her. He could not reveal that in the face of her apparent disgust at the same fact.

She seemed to recede from him, to elude him and become only a remote possibility for his desires. And with this recession, his desire for her increased. Also her desirability increased.

She had arisen and stood before him clear-eyed and fair. There was something about her he had never noticed before, something that called to the deeps of his nature with a sweet low voice.

"Essie!" He took a step toward her.

But she backed away accusingly. "We have been planning for you to come back Christmas." she said, the

clear eyes reproachful. Of course he could not understand what a dramatic appeal his absence had had for her romantic spirit.

"But here I am now," he said pleadingly.

"You ought not to be here."

A great rage filled him, rage mingled with mortification. How large a part of his plans she had filled, and now how she was treating him!

"All right," he jerked out. "If you don't like it, you don't have to." And with this declaration he turned on his heel and started up the bottom.

If he expected her to become fearful at his anger and repent, he was disappointed; if he thought she would overtake him with apologies, he was doomed to be disillusioned.

As he stalked on, he was conscious of being very ineffective in his anger. And with this consciousness his anger grew. He was done with her! Never again should he come down and submit to such insult!

But even before he reached home his heart had softened toward her. Essie, he reflected, was beautiful. He had seen many girls at Sistersville, but none that could compare with her. And she was his girl.

He fell to dreaming.

Chapter 3

ON THE HILL

BOYS, it strikes me a little squirrel hunt would be the best thing for this afternoon. What do you say?"

Ben arose from the table with surprising alacrity. "The leaves are almost gone," was his eager reply. "We ought to be able to see them."

"Where will we go?" spoke up Henry, equally willing.
"O, just up on the hill and around. Not far this time." Then turning to his wife, "Are you feeling good, honey?" he asked.

She smiled up at him, the old loyal smile of the days that were gone, only now it seemed to Ben that her eyes were attempting to conceal something. Was it just his imagination?

"I never felt better, Tommy. Will you be gone long?" ."Not long. Do you want to go with us?"

"N-no, I guess not—this time."

Ben wondered at this, for in the olden days with a ripple of laughter and an eagerness matching his own, she always went along. But now the three went out, leaving her behind.

But any perplexity that he might have felt was soon driven from his mind. They were going hunting! Less than a week he had been back, yet here he was, deep in the old life.

"Now boys, keep your eyes peeled," Peter Rhodes

chuckled gleefully. "They will be hugged tight against the trees at this time of the day."

They came in time to the top of the hill. Up here, in a kind of saddle-back, a few acres had been cleared of timber in the early years, leaving a small open place palisaded by the great trees. The ground was yellow with broom sedge except in the few places where dwarfed ragweeds struggled for a foothold in the pale sandy soil. Up near the point of the saddle-back and overlooking the river far below was a little spot bare of all growth, poor, sandy, shallow, which showed dull ochre in the afternoon sun.

In the center of the clearing was an old log house, once used as a dwelling, no doubt, but long since abandoned for that purpose and thrown open to such chance usage as its location made convenient. The logs were roughly hewn with the broadaxe and mortised in place at right-angles. The many cracks between them were stopped up with clay, long since hardened and in many places fallen out altogether. The door was off its hinge and leaned against the doorway; the roof was in bad repair, with one or two gaping holes; some of the boards of the floor had been ripped up and the signs underneath testified that for long the wild life of the hills had made the place a rendezvous. The whole place looked forsaken, forlorn, abandoned.

Peter Rhodes approached the house, looking at it critically. He walked entirely around it, the while regarding it with an appraising eye. Ben and Henry watched him curiously. Was there corn in the building, likely to attract a squirrel? If not, why was he so interested? He sat down in the doorway.

"Boys, how would you like to live here?" he asked suddenly.

They were silent with astonishment. Live there, in that dilapidated barn? It was not even a good barn!

"Not me!" Henry replied with conviction.

"But why do you ask, father?" Ben queried, still too amazed to say more.

"Because I am thinking of moving in," was the calm response.

To this neither could make an immediate reply. Indeed the announcement had filled them with fear—fear lest they should have to leave the old Manse by the river. For this old Manse where they had lived since memory served them, with its deep recesses and mellow lines, had become one of the few unquestioned facts of existence. Finally Ben recovered himself.

"But why, father? Isn't it good enough where we are? We all like it there."

"Boys, come here a minute. I want to talk to you."

Henry stood where he was, a picture of sullen rebellion, but Ben impulsively drew closer. He sensed some hidden meaning behind his father's calm words. Peter Rhodes cleared his throat, the while he fingered the powder-horn nervously.

"It is about your mother, boys. She—she is not very well any more. Nothing serious, of course. But she seems so feeble. No vitality. It is the fog that comes up from the river at night. It is hard on her. If we could move up a little higher it would do her good."

Henry's eye moved slowly over the dilapidated barn, and then he flared up, a world of bitterness in his tone.

"But is there no other place?"

"None that we can afford."

"But why don't you get a place where you can afford more? Why don't you take another church? Do you want to kill mother?" A look of pain swept over the old man's face. His lips turned suddenly white.

"It is the will of God," he said simply.

"That sounded all right enough when it meant only the extra money in the bigger church. But now it means—maybe mother's life. Surely you won't stay on here now and move into this old—barn!"

"'If any man come unto me and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple,'" the older man quoted.

"I expect mother would like to hear that!"

"Hen! How can you say that?" For it sounded to Ben like sacrilege.

"Son," Peter Rhodes addressed Henry patiently, "there are some things in life you do not understand—yet. One of these is the principle of sacrifice. Do I not know that if I should desert my work here in Barren Rocks for Anne's sake and she should ever find it out, she would be wretched for the rest of her life?"

"She need never know it."

"Ah, maybe not. But if she thought I would run away from my duty for any consideration, she would scorn me to my dying day."

"Let's ask her about it and see."

For the first time Peter Rhodes seemed agitated. He got up from his seat in the doorway and levelled a long forefinger at his interlocutor.

"Don't you dare say anything to her about it," he said sternly. "Ask her whether I should move into a barn for her sake? Do you think for a moment that if her condition demands it, I consider anything a hardship? And then, I don't want her to know that she is quite as puny as she really is. Maybe, since it came on gradually, she doesn't notice it much.

"And what of it? It will be much nicer up here than it is down there. With a little work, this place can be put in fine shape."

"When will we move?"

"Before cold weather sets in. Remember, boys. Not a word about this to her. We are to move because it is so much nicer up here." He started slowly back home.

"But—but how about the squirrel hunt?" Ben queried.

"Perhaps we had as well not go further to-day."

"But mightn't she suspect something?"

"Come to think of it, maybe we had better go on a little."

Two squirrels were killed, and a rabbit was twisted from a hollow beech and taken home alive. Ordinarily this live rabbit would have had Ben's undivided attention. But stirred by the excitement of moving, a live rabbit was a commonplace. Accordingly it was taken up on the bank behind the house and shut in a large box especially constructed for just such an occasion, and left to await its day. As for Ben himself, now that his first amazement was over, he was wildly delighted at the prospect of moving. But he thought most of his mother. How would she take the news?

For well he knew her love for the old Baptist Manse. She loved to sit out under the great chestnut tree, her winter's knitting in her lap, and look off down the winding river to where it was swallowed up by the sweep of the pine-clad hills.

"A little view taken from heaven and put here for us to enjoy," she had said to him one day.

And the old house itself, mellowed and softened by time! She had moved into it with Peter Rhodes years ago, when together they faced life with the gladness and day-dreams of youth. Every room showed evidences of her handiwork. It was there that her children were born; there that Margaret was married. Would she want to leave it? even if she only moved a mile away?

It was at supper that Peter Rhodes broached the subject.

"What do you think, Anne? We were up on the hill this afternoon, and it looked so nice we thought we would like to move up. What do you think of it?"

She caught her breath quickly, and her eyes fell to her plate. Her hands moved nervously in her lap. But only for an instant. When she turned her face toward Peter Rhodes there was the look in her eyes that men sometimes see and straightway go out into the waste places of the world to conquer for the love of a woman.

"O, Tommy, I have always wanted to live up there! It is just beautiful. Do you think we can?"

Peter Rhodes became exuberant.

"Can? Why, honey, we can be up in a few weeks.

All I want is a little time to fix it up."

During the ensuing weeks the lassitude that had enveloped her for months past dropped from her like a mantle and left her a girl again. Again her eyes were the deep blue-green of the pools, and her laughter was the eager liquid music of the 'teens.

On a day some weeks later she stepped back from the wall where she had been vainly trying to make one page of the Journal and Messenger do the work of a yard of wallpaper, arched her head to one side and surveyed the result with dismay.

"O, Tommy, I am afraid it will take another page! And I had so hoped one would do, for that would make

all the living-room papered with the cover pages. They are so much thicker!"

Peter Rhodes came in from the outside. There was that about him which suggested contentment absolute.

"Pshaw, that's all right! Just give me another page, and I will have it on in a jiffy."

"Not at all, sir," she said as severely as she could. "This is my work. You go back to your chimney. Besides, I had to do all over again what you did yesterday."

With a twinkle in his eye, Peter Rhodes returned to his chimney. He had gathered a great pile of uneven stone about him, and with them he was laboriously constructing a chimney at the west end of the house. He laid a stone, mortised it with a mixture of clay and water, and proceeded to lay another. He made an effort at symmetry, but it was plainly only an effort. The completed structure bid fair to be ragged and ungainly. His wife came out to note his progress.

"Do look at the little knobs on it, Tommy. Don't they stick out funny?"

He made a vain effort to look serious, but gave it up. "Not quite knobs, now. Knobs are round. These are more like angles, and sharp ones, too. If a robber comes round after we move in and I am away, all you will need to do is to back him up against this chimney and impale him on it. It will serve as a stockade, you see."

And so they worked. The old log house was overhauled. First was the floor, which Peter Rhodes laid with his own hand. This completed, he took Ben and Henry back into the woods where a great oak was felled and cleaved into clapboards. Marvelous was the playhouse which Little Anne made of the old discarded boards as they were thrown over the eaves; and very

serviceable and solid did the new roof look when it was completed.

"I tell you, Anne, we will be dry in there this winter," declared Peter Rhodes jubilantly as he surveyed the completed work. "We are not like the man who never roofed his house. A stranger came along one day and saw him sitting inside in the rain.

"'Say, man,' the stranger called, 'why don't you put a roof on your house?'

"'O, when it's raining I can't, and when it's not raining I don't need it.'"

Ben laughed in spite of himself. That was one of his father's oldest jokes, and Ben had heard it so many times that it tickled him now just to think of his father telling it over and over again.

When the floor was laid and the roof completed, when the chimney was done and the great fireplace ready, a partition was run through the center and another from the main partition backward, and from an abandoned barn, the building was transformed into a three-roomed dwelling.

The work of papering was completed, issue after issue of the Journal and Messenger—saved for just such a purpose—being pasted to the log side-walls, until the rooms took on the appearance of an old manuscript room, where documents of a long-past day were preserved for future enlightenment.

A lean-to was built to the south, and fitted up for kitchen and dining-room. This done, it was time to move.

"We will begin to-morrow," was Peter Rhodes' satisfied comment when the last nail was driven and he had gathered up his tools. "I want to fix a bedroom in the

loft, but that can be done later. We want to get settled now."

"Won't it be glorious?" Anne Rhodes exclaimed as they went down the hill toward the old Manse. "Little Anne and I will pack the things, and you and the boys can move them up here."

To this Little Anne added her hope.

"And I can have all my things brought to that really-truly playhouse, can't I, mother?"

"Surely, dear. Everything."

That evening Ben and Henry lay awake and pondered.

"No, sir," Henry was saying positively, "I think that when I teach school all week I should not be made help with the moving. Intellectual work is very wearing on me. Besides, a man in my position must have some regard for the appearance of things."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I'm going to slip off."

"Where?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

Ben thought this over. He knew Henry would do even as he had said. As of old, Henry was of a daredevil disposition; and of recent years he had developed a marked aversion to hard work. But Ben would not run away. He was afraid. Something within him made him dread to disobey. But he likewise wanted to do just as little work as possible. How, then, could he manage it, since he would not run away? Soon he nudged Henry eagerly.

"Say, Hen, I have it."

"Have what?" asked Hen sleepily.

"How I can get out of work."

"Don't bother me with it. I'm sleepy."

Ben subsided, but only to ponder in silence the won-

derful plan he had evolved. But alas! ideas do not always work out as planned. Early the next morning he was astir, his face bright with his big idea. The new dog which had greeted him so suspiciously on his arrival, soon found in Ben a companion so tireless and congenial that she was not long in renouncing all allegiance to the other members of the household and becoming his abject and obedient slave.

Shep was her name. And while the name was not unusual, the dog most certainly was. She was large, with long muscular legs and long silky brown hair. Her glance could be cold and impersonal when she chose, but when it was turned full upon Ben it was a mixture of dumb worship and everlasting loyalty.

Ben had decided to take advantage of this loyalty by using her as a means to an end in his big idea.

Months before leaving home for school he had constructed a small wagon on a crude but original design. Sawing off four wheels from the base of a gum tree—chosen because this wood would not split when it dried—he had bored holes in these and fixed them to a running-gear that was as clever as it was fantastic. His big idea was to harness Shep, hitch her to this vehicle, and compel her to pull the loads that otherwise he would have to carry up on the hill on his own back.

Shep looked somewhat puzzled as the harness was being built around her. She looked genuinely alarmed when she was hitched to the wagon. And she looked deeply humiliated as she trudged along the road with the offensive outfit behind her.

Ben wisely decided to break her before starting with the load. She walked up and down the road with a bored but patient air. Once or twice she sat down and clawed nervously at the harness but Ben urged her on. When he thought that she was sufficiently broken, he drove down to the house.

"I have figured out a way of taking a lot more than I can carry, mother," he announced.

"How are you to do it?"

"I've hitched old Shep to the wagon, and she will pull it up."

Just here his father came out. At what he saw he turned his head quickly and contemplated the western horizon. At last he spoke.

"What is this, son?"

Ben was instant in defense of his idea.

"She can do it, all right. Now watch."

He picked up the lines, said something in a low voice, and Shep moved patiently down the road. Turning her, he drove sedately back.

"What did I tell you?"

"That surely is all right, son," he said gravely. "I think for the first load you should take that little keg of molasses. It will fit on the wagon nicely."

Ben jumped at the suggestion. Little had he hoped for such instant approval. He had a momentary vision of himself driving grandly up the hill and cracking a blacksnake whip fiercely over Shep's head, with Shep herself pulling with might and main on the heavy load. Strapping the keg securely to the wagon, he moved slowly away.

Peter Rhodes instantly became active.

"Here is where you see some fun," he announced to his wife.

"What are you going to do, Tommy?"

"Ben will not be satisfied until he tries that, but I know it will not work. Shep won't pull that load up a hill. So I will just give him a chance to find that out."

So saying, he went out of the house and up the bank. Here from its covered box he secured the rabbit that had been brought in weeks before. With it in his arms, he made a wide detour of the mountain, finally coming out on the road up which Ben would have to travel on his way up the hill. Ben had not passed, so he hid himself securely in a bunch of laurel at the side of the road. The rabbit he held between his knees.

For some time he waited. At last he heard Ben's voice in the road below him.

"Go on, Sheppie. Nice old doggie," it said.

Sheppie evidently failed to respond, for before long Ben's voice came up to the listener again, only now it was pitched higher, and held a note of evident exasperation.

"Nice puppy. Now go on, puppy. Pull along. I'll push. Get up, now, Sheppie. Get up! GET UP!"

At the risk of revealing his presence, Peter Rhodes turned until he could survey the tableau below him. His shoulders were heaving as though at some internal convulsion. His face was flushed, the veins standing out prominently on his neck.

"Get up, Shep," Ben commanded, this time more sharply.

But Shep only turned and stared at him, a look of stubborn resolve in her eye. He went round and got her by the head.

"Come along now. Fine old Shep."

She planted her front feet solidly and pulled back. He ceased pulling and patted her on the head. She merely licked his hand and whined in a hopeful manner.

At this, Peter Rhodes put the rabbit on the ground. He turned its head out toward the road and released his hold. It sensed its freedom, looked around curiously and hopped quietly into the road. At sight of the dog it halted abruptly, lifted partly to its haunches, the left front foot folded neatly down, and waited.

Peter Rhodes was watching the dog. When she caught sight of the rabbit, her ears pricked up and the vague expression of her eye gave place to one of acute alertness. She squatted slightly, head lowered, and then lunged forward with a wild yelp.

At this sudden movement, the wagon lurched forward, and the keg, shaken from its position, rolled clumsily down the hill. Shep turned impatiently, snapped herself free of the harness, and bounded furiously after the rabbit.

"Here, Shep. Come back here, Shep," Ben called when his first surprise had left him. But when she failed to heed him, he began to talk his troubles aloud.

"I knew it. I knew it!" he said bitterly. "And now Hen is gone and I will have to do the moving myself. And it will be Ben this and Ben that until my poor heart is broken." He had heard this last expression in a revival love-feast, and it had appealed to him strongly. "Yes, sir, that is just the way it will be."

He heard someone coming down the hill, whistling an unmistakable tune. It was his father. Soon he appeared, and his expression was unusually solemn.

"Why, Ben, is it you?" Then glancing at the overturned wagon, "Where is Shep and the molasses?"

Ben struggled between humiliation and falsehood. He compromised.

"Molasses down there. It's better not to work poor old Shep too hard on these hills."

"Give it up, do you?"

"Guess so."

Later, Anne Rhodes entered the living-room from the

kitchen to behold Ben working industriously. What surprised her was that he appeared bright and cheerful, and not, as she had half feared, sulking over a blighted dream. She hunted up Peter Rhodes.

"How did you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?" he asked innocently.

"Get Ben to give up his idea of getting Shep to do his work without making him resentful."

"Anne, there is a way of doing everything," and he told her.

As for Ben, he had given up his big idea, but he had not forgotten Henry. At breakfast that morning, Henry had covertly stuffed some lunch into his pocket and disappeared. And from that time Ben had seen absolutely nothing of him.

"I might have known it," Ben remarked to himself sadly. "He always does it. Like as not he is off somewhere now having a fine time; and here I am slaving my life away."

He was moving the bedstead out of his own room. As he pulled it away from the wall, he noticed a peculiar cranny in the wall directly behind it. He went over to investigate. Thrusting his hand in, he drew out a packet of letters. They were all addressed in a scrawling angular hand, to Henry.

Ben brightened at once. He slipped quietly out behind the house, drew a letter from one of the envelopes, and proceeded to read it. As he read, his eyes popped and his whole attitude betokened absorbed attention. He finished the first, put it back in its envelope, and opened a second. And he kept this up until the last one was read.

Then he gathered them all together and reentered the house. There is only one word needed to describe him

as he went into the living-room—he was gloating. Evidently this find had been to him as a pearl of great price.

He climbed up on an overturned box, drew a letter from an envelope, cleared his throat importantly, and began:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he addressed his father, mother and Little Anne, "I have here some very important news which I think the audience should hear. It is as follows:

BARREN ROCKS, October 4th.

My dearest Hennie:

My boy's good letter came this morning. O, darling, if you knew how I look for your letters you would write oftener.

Wasn't it fine at the party Saturday night? Don't you wish there was another to go to to-night?

I have been working hard to-day, but am through now. How I wish you were coming over this evening. I must close now. With a world of love,

Your Jennie.

Ben finished reading, and proceeded to add his own comment.

"You will notice it is addressed to Hennie, and signed by Jennie. Quite a beautiful jingle, I must say. Of course you understand," he continued bombastically, "that the Jennie here referred to has reference to Jennie Jones, one of Hen's pupils. Now I will proceed with another."

Little Anne had stopped her work and was listening with a transfigured expression on her face. Peter Rhodes affected not to hear; while his wife was quick to remonstrate.

"Ben, you stop that, and give me those letters."
But Ben was not to be deterred. Deliberately he

opened a second and prepared to make known its contents. During the short silence, a sound was heard in the loft above. And as Ben began to read again, the little trap-door was pushed aside and Henry dropped heavily into the room.

Recovering his balance, he made a wild lunge for Ben. "Give me those letters!"

But Ben was too quick for him. Jumping down from the box, he glided in and out among the objects strewn about the room, Henry rushing madly after him.

"Boys, stop that and get to work here," Peter Rhodes commanded at last.

"But I want my letters."

"If I give them to you, will you do whatever I ask you?"

He promised.

"Whenever I ask it—if it's not now?"

"Yes, yes. Give them here."

"Son, where have you been all morning?" Peter Rhodes demanded gravely of Henry.

Henry turned in confusion, but gave no answer.

"Ben, you have done your share of work for to-day. You go and hitch up the horses and then you will be through. Henry, you can help me with the moving."

Blithesomely Ben went out to the stable, and, the task done, he went in and got his gun, called Shep, and started for the woods. On his way out he passed Hen carrying a bedstead.

"Hello, Hennie," he accosted him. "Too bad you have to work that way when your intellectual duties are so wearing on you."

When he returned late in the afternoon, he found a very meek and forgiving Henry. Time and work had wrought their healing.

"Get anything, Ben?"

"One," and he held up the squirrel.

Henry drew closer.

"We are going to sleep up on the hill to-night. Wait for the last load, and we will walk up together."

The last load of the day was to contain the canned goods, and it had been left to the last because Anne Rhodes wanted to go along with it.

"Now do be careful, Tommy," she admonished as they started. "All my jelly and canned berries and apples and everything are in those boxes, and we must not have a thing broken."

She and Little Anne rode on the load, while Peter Rhodes walked and drove. Henry and Ben followed behind, Henry carrying a large basket.

"I tell you what, Bennie," he said ingratiatingly, "let's unpack this basket and divide up on the load. Then we can go faster."

Suiting his actions to his words, he set the basket down and opened it. Tucked neatly on top was a long brown pone. Ben reached out for it eagerly.

"I'll take that."

"I guess not! We will leave it in the basket. It might get mashed up outside."

When they finally came to an agreement, the others were out of sight. The two followed. On a sharp rise further up, they saw a peculiar object in the road.

"It's a glass of jam," Ben cried, approaching.

It was so. A large glass had rolled out behind. They picked it up, studying it closely. Ben glanced furtively at Henry, only to encounter the latter's glance fixed on him in a quizzical manner.

"Will we?" Ben asked breathlessly.

Henry nodded shortly and put down the basket. The

long brown pone was brought forth. Henry broke a generous piece off and handed it to Ben, keeping an even more generous piece for himself. Very carefully they opened the jam, and very completely they gorged. When they had finished, there was but a little of the pone left. Shep sat on her haunches at a respectful distance, keeping a level eye fastened on her masters. Henry spread the remainder of the pone with a generous supply of jam.

"Nice old doggie," he said, and tossed it to Shep.

"Feel pretty fair?" Henry asked, turning to Ben.

Ben's hands rested complacently on a spot just beneath his diaphragm.

"Pretty fair."

"Then let's go."

Ben pondered for a moment.

"What will we say?"

"Nothing."

Anne Rhodes was standing in the doorway awaiting them.

"Hurry up, children. I want some things out of that basket for supper. I always have said that moving would not be hard if people would only prepare plenty to eat."

Henry held the basket out to her at arm's length, and seemed of a sudden very concerned about the welfare of the horses. Ben followed him up to the stable. It was quite a little later that Little Anne came out to call them to supper.

"Mother forgot the bread down home, so she had to bake some more here. That's why it is so late."

Ben and Henry went into the kitchen; Henry yawned lazily.

"Guess I don't want any supper."

"Me neither," Ben seconded.

"Why, children, you must be sick," and Anne Rhodes was instantly concerned. "Come and eat a little, and maybe you will feel better."

Listlessly they sat down. Peter Rhodes asked the blessing with unusual fervency. And immediately thereafter, he became jovial to an unusual degree.

"Reminds me of a time I went out with Brother Hall to take dinner with Nicholas Struthers. Brother Hall was requested to ask the blessing, and instead of shutting his eyes, he fixed them on the big pone in the center of the table. And this was the blessing:

'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. Nicholas pass the yaller pone around."

He broke into uproarious laughter, but was instantly silenced by the look on Anne's face.

"Why, honey, what is it?"

"It's that plagued stove!" she replied hotly. "It wouldn't draw, and here my nice bread is not baked. It is all dough!"

"But, honey-it-why--"

"O, don't say a word to me!" and she flung out of the room.

Ben and Henry sat in glum silence while their father and Little Anne struggled through the meal. The bread was horrible—not fit to eat.

When it was over and they slunk out through the living-room door, they saw Anne Rhodes by the window wiping her eyes with her apron.

"Do you think it was right?" Ben asked when they were alone.

"Maybe, and maybe not," Henry answered enigmat-

ically. "But what I am wondering is, if he had waited till the end of the meal to return thanks, would he have returned 'em?"

The next day the moving was completed, for there was not much to move. In the living-room, a few chairs, a bed, a stand and a small lamp; in the kitchen, a stove, a safe, a table and a few more chairs; and in the bedrooms, a bed each. That was all. There were no carpets, no pictures on the walls, no ornaments.

On the evening of the second day the first harbinger of real winter arrived in the form of a snow flurry. But the supper was a success, even to the critical eye of Anne Rhodes, and after she and Little Anne had cleared away the dishes, they joined the others in the living-room.

A big backlog had been put in place in the new fireplace; the forestick had been adjusted on the sharp stones that served as andirons, and between them light sassafras and sumach were piled high.

"Get around now, and we will spend the evening in our new home." Peter Rhodes directed.

Ben sat down in the chimney corner, cuddled his knees between his arms, and watched the sparks disappear up the chimney. In the other corner Little Anne scribbled messages to a fairy lover on bits of paper, burned them, and let the draft whirl them up the chimney and away, if by chance they might fall into his hands. Henry sat well back, studying by the lamp on the stand. And directly in front, but very close together, Peter and Anne Rhodes talked in a low voice, constructing fireside dreams of the life that was to be.

In time the children found their beds, leaving the two alone. There was a long period of silence. Anne Rhodes put her hand in that of her husband, and he carried it up to his cheek.

"Peter!" she said, and the name, so seldom used by her, carried him back over the years.

"Yes, dear."

"Peter," she persisted, and continued earnestly, "I have known it all. I knew why you wanted to move up here. I knew how it must have torn you. And I know how strong the temptation was to leave our people here and go away. But you fought and you won, dear. And O, I am so proud of you—so proud."

For a little he sat looking steadily into the fire. Then he turned and buried his head in her lap. For long they sat thus, with never a word. She ran her fingers caressingly through his hair. She understood. He lifted his face at last.

"God has been good to us," he said.

"He has given me a man," she answered him.

Chapter 4

THE END OF THE WORLD

DECEMBER was blown in by a high wind that drove little pellets of blue-white snow before it. The heralds of the North arrived at the beginning of day, and by nightfall Winter reigned in the mountains. Darkness followed dusk with hurried step and clad the hills in sable livery. Nothing could be seen without. Only the pelting of the snow on the one window of the New Manse, the whistle of the wind as it tore at the chimney, and the sough of the freezing forest, testified to the fury that raged without.

But Peter Rhodes was not caught unprepared. Days before he had begun to prepare for just such an hour as this. Through what seemed to him an interminable period, Ben had turned the grindstone while his father sharpened the axes. Followed this another interminable period when, from early morning to dusk with but a hurried stop for dinner, these same axes flashed in and out of the yielding beech and oak and hickory, each stroke flinging out a sharp staccato to the silent day. And last of all the snaking of logs and poles from the hills to the wood-yard, where they were cut up into firewood and stacked in cords.

On the first of December many of these cords hugged the end of the house near the chimney; and in a corner near the fireplace in the big living-room, there was much wood. There was much, also, in the big fireplace; and the red flames licked round it, roaring and crackling up the chimney. In front of the fireplace, it was pleasant.

"I guess we won't light the lamp to-night, Anne," Peter Rhodes said, stretching himself comfortably. "It's nice in here just as it is."

"Isn't it?" and her face showed contentment in the ruddy light.

"Listen!" and Ben sprang up from his chimney-corner seat. "Wasn't that somebody calling?"

They all listened a moment.

"Guess not, son. Just the wind. It is rising."

Ben sat down again, hugging his knees in his arms. He looked into the fire . . . lowered his head . . . nodded. His father's voice recalled him.

"Well, well, here it is December . . . December first . . . An interesting month . . . Very interesting . . . Lots of strange things . . ."

He straightened suddenly.

"Come around closer, children, and I will tell you about the meteors."

Ben drew nearer with shining eyes, and so did Henry and Little Anne. For they knew that what their father had to tell was interesting. For he was a student, was Peter Rhodes, and his mind was a storehouse of queer and interesting facts.

"This is the first of December," he began, "and soon it will be the tenth. Now this there is about December the tenth—it is then that the meteors of Gemini appear.

"The Gemini, children, is the third constellation of the zodiac, and is composed of two bright stars, Castor and Pollux, located on the other side of the Milky Way from Orion. Castor and Pollux are twins, and though Pollux is the brighter, they are always represented as friends and equals. "The sailors believe that their patron, Saint Elmo, often sends down Castor and Pollux to sit on the mastheads of their ships during a storm, where they glow like a reddish or bluish body, as a sign that the storm will soon cease.

"All around the Gemini, in its home in the Milky Way, is a dense swarm of meteoroids, or little particles of star dust that float in space. Now, every year in December, when our earth enters the region of the Gemini, it encounters this swarm of meteoroids, and they enter our atmosphere as shooting stars.

"When we see what we call a shooting star, it is not a real star falling. It is a meteor. It is one of these little particles of star dust which our earth has encountered in its orbit. This little particle enters our atmosphere, and its velocity is so great that it is quickly brought up to a white heat. We see it swish its way through the night and say, 'lo, a falling star.'"

Ben glanced around him uneasily. This talk of comets and meteors never failed to fill him with some vague and formless terror. It was as though something from out the vastness of the unknown might reach down and place its hand upon him. But Peter Rhodes continued.

"Along about the tenth of December, we will be in the region of the Gemini; and if the night is clear, we want to be on the lookout for falling stars."

"Will there be any—any danger?" Ben asked.

"Not a bit."

This relieved his mind somewhat, but he still felt uneasy. Peter Rhodes continued his tale of the stars, but Ben listened with but slight concentration. During the day, perhaps, a story of this nature might not be so bad. But just now—.

As the tenth approached, he was increasingly fearful.

Always with him was fear lest the heavenly bodies should collide and turn the order of the universe—of which he had heard so much—into confusion and chaos.

But the evening of the tenth came clear and cold. It was, Peter Rhodes declared, an ideal night. Bundled up in warm clothing, Ben with all the others, went up on the bare point east of the house to look for falling stars.

But once there, the vast rhythm of the universe enthralled them. In the air was the tense sing of freezing trees; from the distant shoals of the river rose the music of hurrying waters. Even the white stars in the distant firmament seemed wheeling along their courses in a vast and indescribable symphony. It was the majestic oratorio of nature; the thing the ancients named The Music of the Spheres.

"Listen!" Peter Rhodes exclaimed, his voice almost a chant. "The mountains are singing. The stars in their courses are exulting. It is the music of the spheres!"

Then Little Anne cried out.

"O, look, look! There is one!"

It was a falling star. Far above the somber outline of Buzzard Mountain, a white finger of flame traced a parabola across the eastern sky.

"The star dust of the Gemini," Peter Rhodes announced solemnly.

Many times while they sat there, the strange phenomenon was repeated. One after another, now a white curve of streaming light, now a mellow glow as of a firefly winging its way through the air, the meteors of Castor and Pollux passed in the night.

And their going left with Ben a strange weird feeling of mystery.

It was the next evening that Nathan Mallory visited

the New Manse. From his seat near the fire Ben watched the entrance and actions of this strange man with a feeling of awe.

A giant of a man was Nathan Mallory. As he took his seat before the fire, he seemed the embodiment of unleashed elemental forces. He stretched his feet out toward the hearth and slid low in his chair. He was wearing a heavy pair of cowhide boots, and into these his jeans pants were loosely stuffed. A heavy coat lined with sheepskin and far too short for him, bulged out from his body as he slid down in the chair.

After his first perfunctory greetings, he sat for some time in absolute silence, hands folded on his breast and his head dropping forward. In the glow of the fire his eyes snapped with a fierce and bickering light, their fierceness enhanced by a high-arched narrow nose.

Finally he turned slowly in his seat and lifted his head till his eyes rested full upon Peter Rhodes.

Ben looked at his father nervously, wondering whether he would shrink from this man's strange gaze. But as on many previous occasions he was struck by the hint of quiet power conveyed in his father's level fearless eye.

"Yes, Brother Mallory?" he now suggested quietly. The other man evidently had something on his mind; he was clearly agitated.

"Brother Rhodes, I have had a revelation from the Lord," he began. His deep voice reverberated throughout the room.

"And what might it be, Brother?"

"Hit is the end of the world."

"Yes?"

"Brother Rhodes, did you see them that stars a-fallin' last night? a lightin' up the heavens and a preparin' to roll 'em back like a scroll? And jest as she's set down

in the book o' Revelations. That's hit, my Brother. Hit's the end of the world!"

"But, Brother, the Bible says we know neither the day nor the hour. Besides, the 'stars' that you say you saw were not stars at all, but particles of sand that entered the earth's atmosphere."

"But I've seed hit, Brother," he continued solemnly, ignoring explanation of the phenomenon. "I had a revelation from the Lord that the end draweth nigh, and to prepare and make his paths straight."

"But where is your authority for that? You must have something to show for a revelation from the Lord."

"Hit's right here in the Bible." He pulled a worn copy out of the pocket of his heavy coat. "Here hit is, right here in Dan'l. 'And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity; and the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them with fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.' Now what air that but a sartin proof?"

"But. Brother-"

"And here she is agin in Revelation. 'And the third angel sounded and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp... and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the waters because they were made bitter. And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars... And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice,

Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth.' Now what is that? Hit's the end o' the world!"

"It is true those signs shall be in the last days," Peter Rhodes replied steadily, "but how can we tell these are the last?"

"I've figgered 'er out. She's all in Dan'l and Revelation. Put the right meanin' into the numbers on the Beast's forehead, and the day pans out to February twenty-ninth next, to a day!"

Peter Rhodes got up quickly and went over to the wall. When he returned, there was the ghost of a smile on his face.

"But, Brother, there are but twenty-eight days in February this year."

For a moment Nathan Mallory was nonplussed, but for a moment only.

"And who cares? Ain't God already divided the times and the seasons off into days and months and years? And if he could divide 'em off, couldn't he change 'em?"

"But what would be the difference in making it the first of March?"

"But it ain't. Hit's the twenty-ninth o' February. That's what I hearn the angel say, and that's the way she'll stand."

"Did you hear an angel?"

"Sure an' I hearn one. He was a-flyin' and a-cryin' 'Woe, woe,' and a predictin' the appinted time."

Peter Rhodes tried to tell him that the thing was impossible. But the man was not to be moved. No amount of argument could shake him. He got up finally, his whole attitude expressive of belligerent finality.

"Then you won't jine me in warnin' the world?" he flared.

"I guess not, Brother."

"Then I'm a-tellin' ye. Look out. You will be called to the weddin' feast without a garment."

It was only the next day that news reached the Manse that Nathan Mallory was preaching his doctrine of the end of the world broadcast. The whole country had been aroused by the spectacle of the falling stars; and all were stirred to a high pitch of credulity. Consequently many listened to Nathan Mallory as to a prophet. He began to collect disciples about him.

Henry came home from school one day a picture of disgust and amusement. "Lost four students to-day," he announced.

"Why?" he was asked.

"They think that since the end of the world is so near there is no use of bothering any more with school."

The following day disgust had completely routed amusement from his expression. "Lost five more to-day," he said.

"But what do they mean, anyway?"

"They are preparing to meet their God."

Rude Hamilton was visiting at the Manse that afternoon, and her impatience at this news knew no bounds. She jabbed her sewing down on her lap and snorted.

"Prepare fiddlesticks! If they'd prepare to meet their grocery bills it would be more to the point. That's what I say.

"And did you hear about that Bill Tools, Sister Rhodes? No? This here Nathan Mallory approaches him.

[&]quot;'Bill, the end draweth nigh,' he says.

[&]quot; 'What end?' Bill asks.

[&]quot;The end o' the world."

[&]quot;'Let 'er come, Nath.'

- "But you want to prepare fer 'er.'
- "'Any work needed to git ready?"
- "'Nope. No use to work gittin' ready ner after ye git ready. What's the need o' workin' if the last trump's a-goin' to blow in a few weeks?'

"At that Bill he perks up a right smart.

"'Say, Nath,' he says, 'ef there's no work, you can count me a jiner from the word go.'"

She paused to let this sink in.

"And that's the way it is a-goin', Sister Rhodes. Them as don't want to work are takin' up with it to get out o' doing anything."

It did seem so. Surely Bill Tools, the loafer of the countryside was an ardent convert, since it gave him an excuse for spending his days in a blissful idleness.

It was Ben Rhodes who first saw the practical possibilities of the situation. As is usual with a great idea, his had come to him almost by accident. Nathan Mallory had been in his day a great trapper, and his collection of steel traps was the finest in the neighborhood. Ben had often looked them over with an eager and covetous eye. He chanced by Nathan's place, and could not forbear a chance examination. Nathan himself came out to the stable where the traps were kept.

"Young man," he began severely, "if you was a-preparin' fer the last day as ye should be, ye wouldn't be fritterin' yer time away a-covetin' worldly goods."

"You mean the traps will be no good to you any more?" Ben asked in amazement; and it was here that inspiration first began to flood his soul.

"What do I need of traps? Ain't I a-goin' to be in heaven after the twenty-ninth?"

"Then you don't want these?"

Nathan paused. It was the crucial test. He seemed

to waver for an instant; but Ben aroused him to the occasion.

"Of course, if you want to wait to see whether the world comes to an end or not, you wouldn't want to part with them," he said contemptuously.

"Who said I wanted to wait? Boy, if ye want them carnal things, take 'em and go. I'm a-layin' up my treasures where rust doth not corrupt."

Ben lost no time in haggling. Gathering up the traps by their chains, he flung them over his shoulder and departed in haste. The loft in the New Manse he had fitted up as his own private quarters, and to these quarters he now took his treasure, entering via a ladder from the outside.

The bargaining instinct was abnormal in Ben; and he possessed the capacity of reasoning from the specific to the universal. It did not take him long to see the general possibilities in the present situation.

Many of the Malloryites, as the new religionists were called, possessed belongings which Ben had long desired, and he planned a systematic canvass. As the son of Parson Rhodes who boldly denounced as heresy the new movement, he was sometimes received with coldness and suspicion. But he considered the end to be accomplished as worth certain hardships, and kept steadily on.

Ephriam Thomas received him first.

"'Lo, Ep."

"'Lo. Ben."

"Are you preparing for the Lord, Ep?"

"Callate to."

"Too bad you won't get to gig any more, Ep."

"I ain't so sure about that," Ephriam answered guardedly. "Did you ever know a river without fish in it, Ben?"

"Guess not."

"That's jest what I am a-figgerin'. It says in the Good Book, Ben, that there's a river of life a-flowin' fast by in heaven. Fast, mind ye. She's a swift 'un. A leetle swift fer giggin', but there's likely to be backwater. That means giggin', Ben."

This turn of affairs caused Ben no little uneasiness. He had set his heart on possessing Ephriam's long three-prong gig, and the prospect of fishing advantages in heaven disturbed him not a little.

"But, Ep, you can't carry that gig with you."

Ephriam drooped perceptibly.

"That's so."

"So you have no need of it, do you?"

"Callate not."

"Nathan Mallory gave me his traps. Said he did not need them now."

"Take it and go 'long," he said shortly.

But Ben's course did not run so smoothly when he approached Josiah Braggs. Josiah was the proud possessor of a little yearling colt—a little bay with pointed ears and slender body, which its proud owner was bringing up with great care to be a racer.

Many times Ben had slipped out of church and gone to look at this colt. To him it represented the acme of perfection; and to own it as his very own he would gladly have laid a heavy mortgage on his future.

"Fine colt you have there, Josiah," Ben began.

"Ain't he a beauty, Ben?"

"Too bad the world's coming to an end before he grows up."

This seemed to strike Josiah as an entirely new and unwelcome idea.

"Danged if it ain't, Ben," and his tone conveyed keen disappointment.

"And you can't leave him standing hitched up here in his stall to starve after you have ascended, can you?"

"Not on your life he won't stand here and starve."

"But what will he do? You will be gone."

"That's so."

"I tell you what, Josiah, you give him to me. I'll take good care of him when you are gone."

Josiah pondered this for some little time. When he spoke it was with no little vehemence.

"Not by a danged sight will I give him to you."

"Then you will leave him here to starve?"

"Mebbe I will and mebbe I won't. Besides, Ben," and his voice grew confidential, "how can the end come on the twenty-ninth when there ain't no twenty-ninth?"

"Shucks, that's easy. Just add a day, as Brother Mallory says."

"But the next day will be the first o' March."

"But you can call it the twenty-ninth."

"But that won't make it so," he said stubbornly.

"How long do you think it will take the colt to starve?"

"Ben, I tell you what. If the world does come to an end, and I am took up, you come and git him; but if it ain't the last day, he's mine. Now git!"

In spite of such discouragements, however, Ben's store of valuables grew from day to day. His room in the loft contained an increasing number of objects that to him were of incalculable value. And he surveyed these from time to time with mounting enthusiasm.

There was but one cloud in his sky. That was his father's uncompromising opposition to the new movement. To Ben, every added follower of Nathan Mallory

meant a new field of opportunity. But on more than one occasion he knew that men had been deterred from the new faith by his father's merciless arguments. The condition became critical.

"Father," Ben said, approaching him one day, "what is the good of contrarying them? If they are wrong, we will soon find it out. It is only two weeks now to the day they have set. Why not just let them go?"

"How dare you, son! If I refrain from lifting up my voice against this abomination, let my right hand lose its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth," and Ben knew then that his father could not be moved.

But he persevered. He made it a point to attend all the meetings Nathan Mallory conducted, so as to get a line on the new converts. These he followed home and compelled to prove their faith by their works.

It was just eight days before the end of the world that he attended such a meeting. It was held in the school house, and as usual, presided over by Nathan Mallory.

"I tell ye, Bretheren and Sisteren, the end draweth nigh—is even now at the door. The last trump is about fer to sound. And woe, woe, woe to the one that ain't prepared! Hit'd a-been better fer him to a-had a mill-stun tied to his neck and thrun into the river."

He paused significantly, then began again, charging up and down the floor while he spoke, his eyes blazing, his arms waving wildly, each remark emphasized by bringing his foot down heavily on the bare floor.

"An' the moon'll be turned to blood, and the sun'll refuse to give her light. Darkness'll cover the waters, and there'll be no more sea. Lightnin' will flash in the night and rip up the trees. An' I saw the Holy City,

the New Jerusalem, descendin'; and an angel come down, havin' the keys o' the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. An' then Gabriel'll sound the last trump, an' the heavens'll be rolled back like a scroll, an' we'll begin the song o' Moses and the Lamb! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

He stopped suddenly. He faced the congregation squarely, and drew himself up to his full height. His great uncouth form, from boots up to the fierce blazing eyes, seemed to Ben's fascinated gaze to fill the whole end of the room.

He fastened his eyes on the ceiling, extended his arms high over his head, and broke wildly into song, keeping time with his heel.

"I see the Lord a-comin',
A-ridin' on the clouds;
I see the lost a-runnin'
To hide 'em in the ground!"

And as he swung into the chorus, he brought his lambent gaze down to the congregation and began to keep time to the singing with his clenched fists.

> "O, the Lord's a-comin' down, The Lord's a-comin' down; We're a-waitin' and a-prayin' For the Lord's a-comin' down!"

Back in the room a woman's low and agonized scream rose above the confusion, and she fell prostrate across a seat. As if it were a signal for which the others had been waiting, a scene of the wildest confusion followed. Women broke down and wept; men leaned back in their seats and prayed at the top of their lungs; and above

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it all, and fairly dominating the whole situation, the deep rumbling bass of Nathan Mallory, lifted in exhortation and warning.

Until far into the night the uproar continued. And when the tension began to relax, Nathan Mallory made his announcements. His face was drawn and haggard, as though he were near complete exhaustion.

"Bretheren and Sisteren, this is to be our last meetin' 'till we go to meet Him in the air. The day set is the twenty-ninth, and the hour o' His comin' is twelve noon, a. m. We are to meet fust here at the school house fer fastin' an' prayer. And, Bretheren and Sisteren, it has been revealed to me that we had ought to wash each other's feet here that mornin' as a token o' our humility and readiness. Some o' the Sisteren'll bring wash-tubs, and we'll heat water on the stove.

"Bring your robes, too, Bretheren and Sisteren, and at ten o'clock we'll leave here for the top o' Buzzard Mountain, where the Lord is to come to us."

If Ben had been primarily interested in mercenary affairs when he went to the school-house, his emotion as he made his way homeward was a vastly different affair. The wild demonstration had had its effect upon him.

All his old terror of the Judgment Day had been quickened into new life, and as he stumbled along the hill-path toward home he was torn by a thousand doubts and fears. Suppose Nathan Mallory were right, after all? Suppose, at twelve noon on the twenty-ninth the crack of Doom should sound, and find him gloating over worldly treasures?

What if, on that dread day, he should find himself hurled headlong into the blackness of the bottomless pit (though to his mind it had a bottom, if only one went

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far enough) there to be pounced upon by a grinning devil with a pitchfork, and rent and tortured forever?

He tried to grasp the significance of eternity. He recalled vividly an illustration his father had used.

"Suppose," he had said, "the world were made of sand—just little grains of sand. And suppose a sparrow, just one little lone sparrow, should start to carry the earth, grain of sand by grain of sand, to the sun, ninety-three million miles away. It would take it over five million days of twelve hours each, to make the round trip with one grain.

"After five million days, it would have removed just one grain. Think of it, Brethren. That lone sparrow flying to the sun with one grain; returning for another after five million days and making the same trip over again. And if it should keep that up until all the earth had been removed to the sun—even then eternity would not be over. It will never be over. There is no end."

Ben pictured himself leaning against a red-hot stove down in the bottomless pit, and watching that lone sparrow wing to the sun with a grain of sand. Blind terror seized him. Hurriedly he went home, and, stealthily creeping into the loft, selected a long white sheet from a box and hid it among his belongings.

The next day he cut armholes in the sheet, fastened a cord about it for a belt, and laid it away.

"I might just as well have it ready," he said desperately to himself. "Then I'll put it on under my clothes and go up on the hill with them. If the trump does sound, I will tear off my old clothes and be all ready."

Early on the first day of March Ben went down to the schoolhouse. He found it already filled with devout Malloryites. Nathan Mallory eyed him with suspicion.

"What are you doing here, boy?"

"I just-just wanted to see."

"An unbeliever!" some one shouted, and made as if to put him out. But Nathan Mallory held up his hand.

"Let the tares grow with the wheat until the end be," he directly sternly.

When all had arrived, he gave directions for the washing of feet.

"Bretheren and Sisteren, let every one take off their boots and shoes. Brother Thomas, you get the tubs and water ready, Brother Tools and Brother Braggs will wash our feet. Let all be done decently and in order."

Brother Thomas set about his task with alacrity. He drew two heavy wooden tubs into the center of the room, and poured into each a pot of water. But there was no movement on the part of the believers. They sat still.

"Come, come, Bretheren and Sisteren, git ready. Git ready. The end is nigh. We have no time to lose."

Setting an example which the others slowly followed, he sat down and pulled off his boots. He wore heavy red yarn socks, and when he pulled them off, little particles of the red yarn clung to his long, white, bony toes. With superb indifference, he rolled up his jeans pants and put his feet in the water.

Ben pressed up closely, eager not to miss a thing.

Very gingerly, Josiah Braggs stooped down by the tub and put his hands in the water. Very gingerly also, he laved his master's feet and dried them with a heavy towel.

Very jauntily did a young man sit down near the other tub, take off his boots and plash his feet into the water. Bill Tools came near him, scrutinized him coldly for a moment, and rebelled. "I'll be danged if I wash Tate Spragg's feet," he averred hotly.

"What's this, Brother?" Nathan Mallory said sharply. "What's this? Not wash your brother's feet?"

"No I'm danged if I do!"

"Out with you, then. Out from among us! We can have no fellowship with the stiff-necked."

Muttering angrily, Bill Tools went out.

Ben slipped hastily to the back end of the room, fell over a seat, and put his hand to his nose. Holding on tightly, he shook as though he were trying desperately to smother a sneeze. When the spasm had subsided, he pressed eagerly back.

The foot-washing finished, Nathan Mallory again gave directions.

"Now it is time to put on our ascension robes. The women will stay in here by the fire and put theirs on; the men will go out behind the school-house. Git a move on, now. The time approacheth, and the end draweth nigh."

There was a general movement toward the door. But this time Josiah Braggs held back.

"Hell, Nath, it's mighty cold out there in that wind. Can't we stretch suthin' up fer a curtain and stay in here?"

"Brother, why have concern fer your mortal body? You will lay it aside in an hour or so."

"I know, I know. But to have that wind a-cuttin' and a-sawin' around my laigs ain't jest exactly comfortin'. I may lay 'er down, but I've got 'er yit."

"Out with you, then. We will have no one who thinks more of the things of this world than of his immortal soul."

But to this Josiah Braggs would not consent.

"O, I'll go, I'll go, all right. But if I get noomonny and ain't able to do my spring plowin' I'll never fergive ye, Nath Mallory."

"Why such vain talk, Brother? Do you fergit that ye be about to be took up?"

Josiah smiled guiltily about him, and went out.

Ben looked on eagerly while the men undressed and donned their white robes. The robes were made of sheets, something like his own which he wore under his clothes. In addition to his robe, each man produced a light pair of sandals fashioned from sheepskin, which he should wear instead of his boots. When Josiah Braggs stood up, Ben tittered aloud.

The cold, raw wind of March caught his white robe and blew it back from his shins, revealing long, bony shanks on which the brown hair was standing out with the cold.

The men carefully folded their abandoned clothes, and put them over by the schoolhouse. A silver dollar fell from the pocket of Josiah Braggs' pants as he lifted them up. He picked it up, looked at it contemptuously, and flung it to Ben.

"Take it, boy. I have no more use for it."

Very eagerly did Ben put it in his pocket, albeit he was ready in a moment, should occasion warrant, to discard it with his outer clothes and appear robed as a saint. But the events of the morning had taken the edge off his terror.

The men moved around front.

"All ready?" Nathan Mallory called to the women within.

The door was opened, and slowly the women filed out, robed in white, even as the men. All but Alice Arbuthnot. While she was robed in white and wore her hair

in braids as the others, her robe was an affair of beauty, interlaced at the neck with pink ribbon.

She smiled demurely at Tate Spraggs as she appeared. With an expression far from solemn, he hurried over to her side, and together the two moved up the mountain.

Ben hung behind, so preparing himself that he could disrobe quickly in case it became necessary. When at last he took the trail of the others they were far in advance.

Tate Spraggs and Alice Arbuthnot were the hindermost of all; and once Ben saw a white-clad arm slip round her slim waist. For some reason this reassured Ben mightily. The end of the world became of a sudden but a remote possibility, an affair not to be taken too seriously.

It helped some that Tate was Nathan Mallory's nephew. For the blood kin of the prophet to be occupied with worldly desires took much of the terror from the situation; the mysterious had become the human.

When all had assembled on Buzzard Mountain, Nathan Mallory addressed them again. "Accordin' to the sun we have but an hour to wait. It seems most fittin' the occasion that we do not engage in open worship, but set in solemn silence as befits them as wait fer the Lord."

So saying he sat down solemnly and fixed his eyes on the clouds. The others following his example likewise seated themselves. The assemblage awaited the eventful moment. All appeared unconscious of their surroundings except Tate and Alice, who were sitting very close together a little removed from the others and very conscious of each other.

A raw March wind whistled through the pines and

tore at their robes. Again there was the flutter of the robe of Josiah Braggs, and again his bony shanks were laid bare, this time mottled with little knobs of goose flesh in addition to the stiff wiry hairs. Ben's fingers flew to his nose as another spasm passed over him.

"The time is nigh—five minutes, mebbe," Nathan Mallory chanted solemnly.

It was a tense moment. Every white-clad figure drew itself up tautly and looked heavenward. Even Tate and Alice forgot their proximity and became as statues of white marble. Ben's heart began to pound furiously. Sweat broke out upon his forehead. He could scarcely breathe. He watched for a rift in the clouds, now certain that it should appear. Intently did he scan the heavens for the first sign.

But none came. The five minutes passed into ten, and the ten into twenty. Ephriam Thomas glanced furtively at Nathan Mallory, then at those about him. Someone shifted his position slightly. Time passed.... It was one o'clock ... half-past....

All this time Bill Tools had been watching from a secure hiding place near-by. When the hour passed and there was no sign, he looked complacently about him. He waited, a smile broadening his face. At half-past one, he stepped forth, a broad grin running from ear to ear.

"Maybe them clouds was a mite too thick to travel through, Nath," and his loud laughter was caught by the wind.

This was a general signal. Josiah Braggs stood up sharply and glowered about him. He pulled his robe tightly around him. His roving gaze finally rested on Ben. With a quick jerky stride he reached his side and got him roughly by the ear.

"Boy, give me that dollar right now, before I do something to ye," he hissed.

Ben drew out the coin and handed it to him.

"And now, Nath Mallory, if I get my death of noomonny, you will hear from me," and so saying he strode with what dignity he could down the hill.

Only Tate and Alice seemed relieved. He looked down at her, and his eye traveled over the white-clad shapely form, down to the rough sandals on her pink feet.

"We can go right ahead now, can't we, honey?"

Her glance wavered for a moment, then met his bravely.

"Go right ahead?" she asked softly, forgetful of the many eyes turned upon her.

"Sure. With that little house up the river."

"O, Tate!" she breathed. Even the raw wind was not sufficient to cause that flush to steal up over her face.

"Come down and git them things off and I'll take you home," Ben heard him say. Tate had entered his heaven without ascending.

Ben went home shortly afterward. He entered the loft, undressed and flung the hateful robe far from him. "Huh! I knew it," he cried in disgust.

Then his eye roved over the many possessions he had acquired in the past few weeks.

"Shucks, though," he continued. "I wish they had set the day a few weeks later. That would have given me more time."

Then a new thought struck him, causing him at first to register fear. But he straightened. "Come after them? And me the Parson's son?" he cried triumphantly. "Well, I guess not."

Chapter 5

AT HOME

THE days of the spring that followed were never to be forgotten by Ben. Not that they were unusual days. His tasks were the same as for years past, and the world about him was unchanged. Yet the work that he did seemed easier, and the familiar world that brought from its storehouse the treasures of spring, seemed lovelier that year than ever before.

It may have been because he was bigger and stronger. Not that he had ever been sickly. Anne Rhodes, firmly convinced that a child, while still a child, should have every disease to which childhood is susceptible, had steered him remorselessly into catching distance of every one, and then had watched over him as tireless as she was tearful until he was well. But he had emerged from each with a jocund hardihood that early presaged for him the powerful constitution of his father.

With the exception of a nightmare back somewhere in his earliest years when he had had the measles and whooping-cough at the same time, and a mild inconvenience a few years later when he was made a laughingstock by the chicken-pox, Ben himself hardly remembered ever having been sick at all.

This spring in particular he grew with the zest and enthusiasm of a whiteoak sprout. The wardrobe of the Rhodeses had always been constructed on a descending scale. That is to say, each article descended from father

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to son in the form of an inheritance. Peter Rhodes first bought the clothes and wore them as his best in the pulpit until they would no longer serve in such public manner, when his wife would affect a metamorphosis and they would appear in due time on the somewhat ungainly form of Henry. When they finally reached Ben, the chances were they gave mute testimony of the hardships through which they had passed.

For Sunday clothes, Henry, now a dignified pedagogue, found it possible to make provision for himself. And even Ben, by dint of much strategy, found it possible to afford store clothes for the more formal occasions of his life. But for their every-day outfit, both Henry and Ben still depended upon their father, and their mother's nimble fingers.

Consequently, Ben, at this period, was the despair of his mother. To her astonishment, it seemed she would no sooner get a pair of pants adjusted to his needs, than he should shoot up an inch or two more and draw them all out of shape.

But to Ben himself his increasing size worked no hardship. Seldom a day passed that he did not crook his right arm, and with his left hand feel lovingly of his biceps. And what he discovered there gave him both confidence in his own mind and a vast respect in the eyes of his fellows.

It may have been this increasing strength that made the present spring more enjoyable than usual. Tasks that once had taxed him to the uttermost were now but child's play for him.

It may have been that his escape from school was another element in his enjoyment. He had sat in the class-room, his eyes fixed on the page in front of him, but with his heart dwelling off in the mountains. It was too bad even in the fall; but the thought of being cooped up there in the spring was too unwelcome to contemplate. In contrast with what might have been, this present freedom was very sweet indeed.

But the main reason this spring was a greater joy to him than any previous spring had been, was that he loved these great out-of-doors with a passion that increased with the passing of every day. He loved to climb to the summit of Crow Point, above the New Manse, watch the sun whose amethyst rays were sieved to streamers of radiance through the straight trunks of the black oaks, and dream, not of the days gone by, but of the days that were to be. He loved to climb the young white oaks, settle comfortably in their tops, and from this point of vantage watch the antics of the baby squirrels as they went through their first calisthenics of life. He never failed to stage a contest between the dogwood and the sarvice, as to which would answer soonest to the amorous call of spring.

"Do you know," Ben had heard a drummer at the store say one day, "I feel sorry for these lonely little boys away back here in the woods."

Ben went home and approached his father on the subject.

"Father, what does 'lonely' mean? I don't mean the soul being lonely for its Maker. I have heard that. But a boy—what is it when he is lonely?"

"Are you lonely, son?" and there was a twinkle in his eye.

"But what does it mean, father?"

"It means the way you felt over at school, when you thought of the place here at Barren Rocks."

"O!" and a great light broke upon him. After that,

when he thought of the drummer's words, he replied to them by one eloquent ejaculation.

"Shucks!" was all he said.

He lay stretched out full length on the floor in his loft, watching the big white drops of a late April shower fall plashing to the ground. It rained hard—so hard that he could see the white mist hanging over the tops of little white oak saplings.

"Just after this is over," he decided aloud, "I'll go and hunt some bradleys."

Bradley may not be in the dictionary, but the word figured prominently in Ben's complex of 'something good.' For bradleys were to him what mushrooms are to us; and well did he know when and where to find them.

After the rain, he left the house, a small tin pail in his hand, and entered the woods. The soft, moist earth was pleasant to his bare feet; the smell of the freshly bathed forest was in his nostrils. Anticipation ran high.

One by one he gathered the bradleys, noting their golden tops, breaking off little bits to make sure he was not gathering puddocks—and the puddock to him meant the toadstool.

"Ya, ya, ya," he sputtered with great glee, "one, two, three . . . nine! Nine whoppers! Now twelve will make me all I can eat. . . . Just three more."

Then an unwelcome thought seemed to prick him. He contracted his brows fiercely, and shook his head in firm negation.

"I simply will not give you one, Little Anne!" he declared hotly. "You had the same chance to hunt them that I had, but you lazed around waiting for me to slave for you."

"O, just give me a bite," a small voice pleaded.

"Not a bite, I tell you. Not a bite. Maybe the next time you will hustle around a little yourself."

"Now, Ben, you give her some," and it was clearly Anne Rhodes who intervened.

Ben gave a gesture of helplessness.

"I knew it! Always it's Ben do this and Ben do that."

He made as if to break off a small piece of one of the scrawniest bradleys and hand it over.

"Now there! Take that."

The situation up to this time seemed pretty simple. Ben's face wore an expression of relief. But it darkened again, and he made a sound as of some jovial newcomer entering, bandying inane compliments and observations. Soon the sound became articulate.

"So you have hunted up some bradleys, have you, Ben? I tell you Ben is a hustler, eh, Little Anne? How many did you get? Twelve? Well, well, well. Twelve. Why, that's three each for all four of us, Hen being at school. How nice!"

Ben's gesture here clearly indicated that he washed his hands of the whole matter.

"All right! Take them! Eat them all! Don't mind me. I don't want any. I merely went out in the wet woods and gathered them for you people to eat. Of course a snake nearly bit me, and I got wet to the bone and stubbed my toe, but that's all right. I like to do those things."

"Why, Bennie," and this time it was a soft maternal voice, "we won't eat your bradleys. It's not fair. Just give Little Anne a piece, and you eat the rest."

This settled to his evident satisfaction, Ben gathered his twelve bradleys and started home. It was nearing supper time. His idea was to take the bradleys in and roast them on the stove while his mother prepared supper.

Hiding the pail cleverly in the wood-yard, he went in to reconnoiter. The kitchen was empty, albeit a fire burned noisily in the stove, and something boiling in a heavy iron pot sent forth a delightful odor. In the living-room was his mother, alone.

He decided that the time was propitious. Securing the pail again, he went into the kitchen and proceeded to prepare the feast. Lifting a bradley from the pail, he placed it top downward on the hot stove, holding it firmly by the long stem. There was a sizzle, the bradley went limp . . . was ready. Sprinkling some salt upon it, Ben ate it with evident relish.

In this manner he cooked and ate five, and longed steadfastly for more. He felt as if two dozen would not serve to satisfy his appetite. He was preparing the sixth, when he stopped suddenly, arrested by an obtruding thought. He slipped to the door dividing the kitchen from the living-room, paused cautiously and looked in. His mother sat rocking in a chair, unconscious of his scrutiny.

He went back to the stove, patiently cooked and salted four of his remaining bradleys, arranged them neatly on a plate and entered the living-room.

"Here, mother," he said, holding the plate out to her.
"What is it, son?" she asked in some surprise. Then
seeing what it was, she looked at him quickly, drawing
in her breath with a little catch.

"Thank you, dear," she said.

With a very doleful but a very resolute glance, Ben surveyed the three remaining bradleys. He smelt of one, enjoying its rich odor.

"Well, if she wants any, why isn't she around?" he

asked the stove, exasperated. "Does she expect me to hunt her up and feed her?" Little Anne was clearly the object of this exasperation.

He laid two of the three on the table.

"I'll leave them for her. That leaves me just one more."

Quickly he prepared this one, and very quickly it disappeared. This done, he looked at the two on the table. He sighed and moved reluctantly toward the door. There he turned, looking back over his shoulder.

"They might spoil any minute, now," was his comment. Then after an interval, "Why doesn't she come? I can't afford to let the things spoil."

Walking quickly to the table, he picked them up, placed them on the stove, salted them, and swallowed them down.

"It's her own fault!" he declared fiercely. "She should have been here!"

But his conscience did not bother him for long. The bradleys' internal effect had been entirely too salubrious for that. Taking a view of life wholly cheerful, he went up to his old trysting place on Crow Point to dream of finding seven million dollars in a decaying wooden box, of bringing it forth and distributing it generously to his friends.

At first this day-dream made provision for finding only one million dollars, but Ben's wants quickly outstripped this paltry sum, and by the addition of a few millions here and there, the number was finally brought up to seven.

"Yes, sir," he explained it, "the corner of the old box is just sticking out from under the leaves. 'Huh! Nothing in that old box,' I say. But when I pull it up and lift the lid, she is crammed full of money. Not paper

money; that would rot. But dollars—silver dollars, with here and there a dime or two. I fill all my pockets plumb full, and walk down to the house.

"'Pretty shabby old suit you've got on, Hen,' I say.

"'Right smart worn out, Ben.'

"'I tell you what, Hen. Here's a half million dollars,' and I hand it over to him. 'Go out and buy up a few clothes.'

"'Where did you get that money, son?' father asks.

"'O, I just picked it up around.'"

But such high-handed generosity soon involved Ben in difficulties. A half million silver dollars handed out at one clip cut a big hole in his fortune. In all fairness he should give his father an amount slightly larger than he gave Henry; while his mother and Little Anne should each have a few hundred thousand.

"Besides," he broke out in a worried tone, "I want a bicycle and a gun and some store clothes and a banjo."

Then after pondering the turn of affairs for a moment, his face cleared and going back to the beginning he readjusted the whole affair to meet all contingencies.

"Yes, sir, the corner of the old box stuck right out. I lifted up the lid and saw that it was crammed full of silver dollars. I emptied them all in my lap and counted them over. There were even seven million dollars. I counted them again to make sure. Seven was right. I just went down to the house.

"'Here, Hen, take this million dollars and have a little fun on it.'

"'But where did you get a million dollars?'

"'All right, if you don't want it I guess I can use it."

"'O, I'll take it all right, all right.'

"'You'd better. I'm in no mood for fooling with you.'

"'Son, how about this?' and father comes out and sees all the money. 'Where did you get this?'

"'I worked for it. Now, you are my father, and you have been very good to me. I'll just give you three million dollars.'

"'My son, I assure you I appreciate this.'"

Anne Rhodes received one million from this happy find, and Little Anne had a million given her to be used at some future day. That left the finder a million, and with it he planned his purchases. All went well until he discovered a slight oversight.

"Shucks, now," he said depreciatingly, "I'll just say there were seven million dollars and ten cents in the box. I'll take the ten cents and get some fly hooks and a nickel's worth of candy."

Such was the influence of this day-dream that he felt tremendously uplifted. Swaggering with a new confidence born of this imaginary opulence, he climbed slowly down the hill, emerged on the bank of the river, and followed a secluded path down the bottom.

"It is just as well to let Essie see that I have some money," he told himself. "Not that I care what she thinks, but it won't hurt her to know. It may keep her in her place."

This was not the first time he had gone down the bottom since the day after his arrival home. On several occasions he had gone down, but he had had difficulty reestablishing himself in Essie's good graces.

With masculine thoroughness he had gone over the whole problem again and again: He knew she had been broken up by his departure for school; indeed, he told himself, it had been partly for her sake that he had run away and returned to Barren Rocks.

But his deserting school, instead of lifting him in her

estimation, as he had expected it to do, in some unaccountable way lowered him mightily.

"Women," he muttered originally, "are inconsistent. She did not want me to go; she was mad when I came back. But I'll show her. I'll just go down with all this money."

When he came in sight of the Evans homestead his manner changed quickly. Instead of the half indolent figure walking meditatively along, he became a creature of urgent purpose, driven cruelly by a ruthless destiny.

His pace quickened. His brows contracted, and he fixed his piercing gaze upon an object approximately twenty-eight miles the other side of the house he was approaching. And for all the sign he gave, he might have been twenty-eight miles away himself. He looked neither to the right nor to the left.

Once when he was in the road directly in front of the house, he thought he sensed the presence of Essie Evans at a window, watching him. Her face, he suspected, wore a wistful expression, but he hardened his heart and went on. Only once he tried desperately to turn his eyes without turning his head, to get a look at the face framed in the window. But the result was far from satisfactory. All that he could see was what appeared to be a plant set in a pot; and it disturbed him greatly to reflect that Essie might not have seen him at all.

He kept steadily on until he was some distance below the house, when he dodged into the pawpaws beside the road. He was greatly agitated. His heart disturbed him by its unusual activity; his shirt pinched at the neck.

"I'll show her, I'll hide here a minute and then walk back, and not let on I know she lives there!"

True to his word, he started back, and this time his

eye was steadfastly glued to the summit of Crow Point. So oblivious was he to his surroundings that he stepped on a round stone in the road. It turned with him, throwing him momentarily off his balance. He recovered quickly and hastened on; but he was uncomfortably conscious of having heard a titter from the window. This enraged him.

"Why did I come down here at all? If I hate her, why am I staggering around here, letting her laugh at me? I'll just go on home and never speak to her again in all my life."

But when he got out of sight of the house he turned and looked back. He was disappointed. He had half hoped that she would be following after him, the wistful expression on her face enhanced by penitential tears, but she was not.

He hesitated for a moment, then started to walk back again. But this time he changed his method. No longer was his gaze riveted on distant objects. He scrutinized the road sharply, looking from right to left as though in search of something. He neared the house.

When, approaching the house again, he saw from the corner of his eye a trim supple figure emerge from the doorway and approach the gate, his scrutiny of the roadway became more pronounced. When the prim figure stood in the gateway and regarded him with a perplexed smile, he did not look up—although he saw.

"Why, Ben, have you lost something?" and her voice was very propitiating, notwithstanding its perplexity.

Ben wheeled as though he had been rudely jerked from a profound revery.

"Why? You? What are you doing here?... Where am I, anyway?" he asked in great surprise.

"Have you lost something, Ben?" and the ghost of a smile played about the corners of her mouth.

"Sure I have. And I must hurry and find it."

"What was it?"

"I lost my-my-knife."

"How do you know you lost it down here, if you didn't know you were down here?"

"I was down-it might be down here."

"Come here a minute, Ben."

"What do you want? I'm busy."

Come here."

He went over and stood beside her. It was as though he was impatient to be away.

"Ben, are you mad at me?"

"Don't know."

"What have I done, Ben?"

"Nothing."

"Then—can't we be—good friends again?"

A spirit of boldness came over him. While appearing still to be absorbed with the thought of finding his lost knife, he reached out a hand and very awkwardly found hers.

"Walk up the road with me, Essie," he asked impulsively.

Without a word the two started up the road side by side. As they walked, Ben made up his mind. He had imagined it many times, and now, he decided, it was time to do it. He intended to put his arm about her waist!

Many times he had figured out just how it should be done; and just how it would feel to encircle her slim waist with his arm. He glanced covertly at her now. How slim she was! How dainty! He glanced down the road. They were out of sight. Now was the time, if ever.

With a clumsy movement, his arm glided around her waist. But she sprang away quickly.

"Ben! What are you doing?" and she faced him with blazing eyes.

Ben's eyes fell. A dull red suffused his face.

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you!"

"Believe it or not. Suit yourself."

She relented.

"Are you mad at me, Ben?"

"Are you mad at me?" he countered.

She shook her head.

"Then why did you go with Grouchie McRand?"

"Why didn't you come for me?"

This was entirely to his liking. He became bold again.

"Do you like me better than Grouchie?"

"I won't say."

"Then I guess I better be going," and he turned abruptly and started on up the road.

"Ben," she called after him. He looked back.

"Do you want me to?" she asked him.

"Suit yourself."

She hesitated for a moment, then straightened up haughtily.

"Good-by, Ben."

"Good-by."

Chapter 6

THE SHARPSHOOTER

FIRECRACKERS were not a part of Fourth of July celebrations at Barren Rocks. It was only at Christmas, and not always then, that they made their appearance. On the Fourth of July the celebration always took the form of a contest on whose outcome hinged the title of champion shot of all the country round about. Consequently it was an affair of deadly seriousness; for excellence in marksmanship was a distinction that ranked high, if not highest, in the estimation of every man.

All values are relative. To the Red Man ability to fling a tomahawk ranks high, while oratorical powers are not prized. With the cosmopolite wealth is the ranking value, while obedience may be regarded with contempt. But with the ascetic riches are denounced and obedience is a part of the vow.

Yes, values are relative. What to one man seems great, to another is small. What is prized by one community, is scorned by another. The people of Barren Rocks valued marksmanship.

On the Fourth of July all paths led to Barren Rocks. For on the playground of the old schoolhouse the great event was staged. No one cared to be late. Usually before the sun had well topped Buzzard Mountain the first groups had begun to arrive. By ten of the clock all were there.

At some quickly whispered word, a tense silence would settle over the great throng, and the work of winning the championship had begun.

Every boy for miles around looked forward to that day. While each knew there was no hope of present distinction, each nevertheless looked forward to some happy future day when, with vast coolness and unerring aim, he should win the proud distinction of being the best shot of the neighborhood.

Ben was made immediately aware of the imminence of the great event by a sight that met his gaze when he returned one golden afternoon from a long tramp through the forests. His father was out in the wood-yard very carefully cleaning and inspecting his long squirrel rifle. Deliberately he shoved the wooden ramrod with its tow tip down the barrel, brought it out and gave it close inspection.

He chuckled as Ben came up.

"What are you doing, father?"

"I am getting ready to demonstrate to you, son," he began deliberately, "just who is the best shot in this county."

"Samuel Aked got it last year."

"And Peter Rhodes got it the year before. And what is more, son," he said calmly, "Peter Rhodes is going to get it this year."

At once Ben felt profoundly convinced that his father spoke the truth. It had given him a rude shock the year before when Samuel Aked had won out by a close margin. His pride in his father's prowess knew absolutely no bounds; and both secretly and openly he rejoiced in the latter's uncanny marksmanship. But Samuel Aked was likewise a sharpshooter, and so tirelessly had he

practiced that on the last Fourth he had won even over Peter Rhodes.

Peter Rhodes himself had seemed greatly discouraged over the event.

"I guess I'll not try it any more, Anne," he had declared on the way home. "Maybe—maybe I am dropping behind."

"Now Tommy, you know you will try again, and you will win it, too," and her voice had conveyed her conviction.

As Ben now thought back over the past year, he remembered many things that tended to put him at his ease. He recalled, for one thing, an old backlog whose heart was shot full of holes; and for another, he understood why his father had preferred long and difficult shots at rabbits, as if testing his aim. But if he had heard Samuel Aked's soliloquy as he handled his rifle lovingly on this same evening, he might not have felt so secure.

"I did it last year," Aked said, running his eye slowly down the barrel, "and I kin do 'er again this year. You have never failed me, eh Bess?" he addressed his rifle by name as if it were possessed of understanding, "and I guess you will not peter out on me now, eh, old girl?"

Thus spoke Samuel Aked to his faithful Bess at the precise instant Peter Rhodes gave to his gun its final examination and pronounced himself satisfied.

"I guess you are equal to the occasion," he said from his block in the wood-yard.

It was even as men have contended from the beginning.

Ben left his father at the wood-yard and went to consult with Hen.

"Are you going to try it the Fourth?" he asked.

"Ben, when will you ever learn that there are greater things than shooting a gun to claim a man's attention? Will I try out on the Fourth? I am not even sure I'll go at all. Those petty things fail to interest me any more."

"But—but—why, Hen, it might mean the champion-ship," and Ben was truly amazed.

"I am looking for championship in greater things."

But for Ben there was no greater height to which he could aspire than to this very championship. And while he knew he could not win anything yet—would not even be given a chance to try, like as not—he nevertheless got out his twenty-two and devoted all his spare time to practice.

Unmistakable sounds coming from the little clearings on surrounding hills gave eloquent testimony that the event was a matter of interest to more than two families. From these clearings during the long twilight of ensuing days, came the muffled report of rifles' discharge. Now here, now there, the indefinite nollow sound told better than words that many aspirants were seeking to improve their aim.

Especially from the north, where Little Creek had in years past weathered out a green bottom, did these sounds arise. Clearly, here dwelt some one who was desperately striving to bring himself up to championship form. And Ben knew who it was.

It was Charlie Snowden, whom many called lazy and more declared reckless and dissolute. Lazy he undoubtedly was, and perhaps reckless and dissolute also, but there was a certain tolerant generosity about him that endeared him to many.

For some reason unknown to Ben, these muffled re-

ports from the north bottom seemed to make Henry vaguely uneasy.

"I don't see why Charlie Snowden should be shooting so much these days. He can't do anything," he remarked with disgust and impatience one day.

"Maybe not, but he will some day," was Ben's defensive reply.

As the Fourth drew near, Hen haunted the post office continually. He appeared troubled, perplexed, afraid.

"What are you looking for in the office, Hen?"

"Nothing. Can't I go to the store?"

"I know." Little Anne said with relish, "he's looking for a letter from Jennie."

"Huh! We quit long ago."

But in spite of this final assertion, he came back from the office each day with the troubled expression of his countenance magnified. Finally he took Ben out behind the house. His manner was unusually propitiating, and Ben sensed some unusual request and steeled himself to meet it.

"Say, Bennie," he began in conciliatory tone, "how would you like to run over to Jennie's this evening? You might see plenty of young rabbits on the way, and it is a fine walk."

"I guess I don't need the walk, Hen."

"But you will have a good time."

"What you want me to go for?"

"I have a little note here for her," and he pulled it hurriedly out of his pocket. "You take it over and give it to her, and I'll do something for you some day."

"What will you do?"

"O, anything."

"I tell you. You give me ten cents and I'll do it."

"All right. Just as soon as you get back."

"Give it to me now."

Very reluctantly he drew a dime from his pocket. Ben pocketed it and the letter.

When he returned from his trip he bore a reply that Henry snatched from him, tore open, and avidly read. As he read, his face went white. With heavy step he turned and went within.

Ben was puzzled. What could have been in the note? And very naturally he watched his first opportunity, found the letter and read it himself.

"Dear Henry," it ran. "Ben gave me your note, and I am sorry I can't go with you on the Fourth. But Charlie Snowden came by yesterday and asked me to go with him and see him win the second championship. Don't you think it is nice that Charlie can enter the real contest? I do hope he wins it!"

And that was all. The note was not even signed. Ben grinned as he put it back in its envelope. With what Henry considered an uncanny insight, Ben approached him the next day.

"Say, Hen, you were right. These shooting matches are little things. They are too petty for real men."

Henry glowered at him, a baleful gleam in his eye. He had been moodily stalking about all morning. He did not reply, so Ben continued.

"Yes, sir, when a man grows up, he just naturally grows away from this foolishness."

Ben was in his loft room a few hours later when he saw Hen creep stealthily into the house, and a moment later reappear with the big squirrel rifle in his hand. Quickly he vanished into the woods in the direction of Crow Point. Just as quickly Ben followed him at a safe distance.

Arriving at Crow Point, Henry laid a walnut on a sharp stone, measured off one hundred paces, settled himself, and began his practice. Ben watched from his hiding-place for a long time. At last he crept up from behind, stepped quickly out, and spoke.

"'Lo, Hen."

At the words Hen jumped up quickly, seeking to put the rifle behind him.

"You oughtn't to shoot squirrels this time of year, Hen. It is not right to kill them yet."

Hen looked relieved.

"O, it won't hurt to kill a few. Just so they have no little ones."

He followed Ben's gaze nervously. It was fixed on the untouched walnut.

"Funny place for a walnut, Hen."

Henry exploded.

"Now you get away from here! I guess if I want to shoot at a mark I can do it, can't I?"

"Sure. But when a man grows up---"

But at Hen's lowering aspect he disappeared.

Early on the morning of the Fourth, Peter Rhodes, followed by Henry and Ben, went out for the final practice.

"I just want to shoot twice to see how my nerve is this morning," explained Peter Rhodes. And what he discovered must have been satisfactory, for after the second shot he handed the gun to Henry.

"Take your two now, Henry. Then I'll clean her out and we will start."

Henry's wild effort filled Ben with an ambition to show him up.

"Let me shoot it once, father. I believe I can beat Hen."

"Not yet, son. This is too heavy for you. You keep on with your twenty-two, and some other time you may enter."

From woodland paths far and near came the frequent reports of rifles. Barren Rocks was assembling, and the sharpshooters were testing their aim.

Ben slipped down off the mountain and waited in a clump of elders until he saw a trim form coming up the bottom path. It was Essie—Essie dressed for the occasion. Very fresh and dainty did she look in her new gingham, her golden hair hanging in thick plaits down her back.

When she drew near his hiding-place, Ben stepped into the path, gun half raised, feigning to scan the trees for squirrel.

"Hello, Ben," she called sweetly.

"'Lo, Essie. Going to the match?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Guess so."

He fell in beside her, and together they went toward the schoolhouse. Approaching a group of boys, Ben developed a sudden and remarkable concern for the welfare of his gun, keeping his eyes fixed upon it until he was well by the group. A titter from them made his ears tingle.

"Your gun giving you trouble, Ben?" a voice from behind called to him, and he recognized the sneering accents of Grouchie McRand.

"Who's that with you, Ben?" another voice called, and there was a general titter.

Ben was vastly ashamed, but he made no sign. As they approached the playground, there were evidences of the presence of the crowd on every side. Here and there, hitched to saplings, posts and laurel, were the horses, poor, jaded, listless, their heads low, their mouths open. And on the playground itself, the great throng of people!

Henry, unusually witty and interesting, was chatting with Henrietta McRand; while she responded to him in a way that was both flattered and embarrassed. Quite a little apart from the others, Charlie Snowden was regaling Jennie with a recital of his own prowess. Furtively, from time to time, when she could do so unobserved, Jennie glanced at the animated Henry, and her glance returned to Charlie freighted with interrogation.

And still further removed from the crowd, Samuel Aked leaned motionless upon his long rifle. Slowly his glance roved over the crowd, but he did not move. Only now and then he stroked the barrel of his rifle lovingly. His was a somber figure, serious, brooding, unmoved. He contemplated the championship.

Uneasily, Ben took in the import of Samuel Aked's purpose, and his heart sank with fear as he looked at his father, towering among the crowd with a handshake and a word of merriment for each one.

"O, why doesn't he get off to himself, and not get all worked up by hanging around in there?"

"Do you think he will win it, Ben?"

"Of course I do," but the fierceness of his reply belied his words.

The time arrived. Bill Tools was chosen to direct the match, and from his usual indolent attitude, he was transformed into a being of tireless energy and swaggering importance.

"Clear away! Clear away, dang it. Give me room."
Immediately the crowd surged back to the border of
the playground, leaving the center clear. Starting at the
little knoll at the upper end, Bill walked down the play-

ground one hundred and twenty steps—long, even steps. This done, he drove a small white poplar paddle into the ground, blade up. In the center of this blade, a small spot, about the size of a silver dollar, had been made with a pencil.

This black spot was the mark at which the men were to shoot. And to Ben's nervous glance, standing as he was up on the knoll, it was hardly visible.

"Mercy! They can't even see that, much less hit it," was his despairing remark.

Bill Tools was explaining the rules, although every one present knew full well what they were.

"Bretheren and Sisteren," he said, "the shooters'll stand on this knoll and shoot at the spot on the paddle. There's two contests, the second and the fust. The second is fer the young 'uns," and this witticism was greeted with much laughter, "and the fust is fer the real men. And there'll be three tests for each man, and he'll have two shots in each. Fust there's the offhand shot, straight from the shoulder; then there's the elbowrest; and the last one'll be the belly-rest. You git it? Three tests, six shots fer each man, and the one makin' the highest count all told gits the prize."

There was a moment's silence. Then as by a sign, a few men stepped to one side. They were the recognized seconds—for the best shooting was reserved for the last.

"Come, Brothers. Who'll be first?" Bill cried face-tiously.

Henry stepped up nervously, Peter Rhodes' rifle in his hand.

"Guess I'll try it first."

"Bretheren, the Parson's son," Tools announced.

Hen was clearly nervous. On the offhand shot, the

muzzle of the rifle wavered nervously. At the discharge, Tools solemnly examined the paddle.

"As purty a miss as I ever see," and his sally was greeted by loud laughter.

"Nicked the corner, danged if he didn't," was his remark, at the second shot. There was a little nick cut out of the top corner of the paddle, far above the black mark.

On the elbow-rest and the belly-rest, Henry fared better, but he was certainly not in championship form. When he had finished, he turned and walked away, his face burning, his eyes on the ground. Charlie Snowden stepped up on the knoll. With remarkable unconcern and with unusual accuracy, he drove shot after shot into the paddle.

Bill Tools dropped his facetious manner and became serious.

"Boy, you're a comer," he declared as Charlie finished. With a dignified bow Charlie acknowledged the compliment, and made to rejoin Jennie. But she was not where he had left her. As Henry had moved a humiliated figure through the crowd, she made her way to his side. He looked up and saw her, but dropped his eyes and continued on his way.

"O, Henry, you did just fine," she said. And then as if remembering, she went still closer. "And—and I'm sorry, Henry."

He looked up at her as if he could not believe his ears. "You—you mean——"

She laid her hand lightly on his arm.

"Come. Let's go back and watch it together," and it was there that Charlie saw her when he would have rejoined her.

"Well, I'll be—blessed!" Ben ejaculated when he saw the turn affairs had taken.

Singing Mountains

"What is it, Ben?" Essie inquired, her eyes following his.

"Say, women—women—" but he could find words for no more.

The shooting went on apace. Clearly Bill Tools marked the shots and put up new paddles. Mightily did he exert himself to make the event a brilliant one from his standpoint, and well did he succeed.

Slowly the contestants were eliminated, until at last only two stood on the knoll. It was the climax. Peter Rhodes and Samuel Aked stood alone.

"We'll make jest one modification to the perceedings at this pint," Tools explained. "Each man'll take shot about. One shoot; other shoot. Shot about's fair play, ain't it?"

"Which 'un goes first?" was asked.

"Makes nairy a bit difference to me," Bill replied. "Contestants'll suit themselves."

Samuel Aked nodded curtly to Peter Rhodes.

"Go fust, Parson," he said.

100

As Peter Rhodes stepped up on the little knoll, Ben caught his breath in the old and boundless admiration. He felt little tremors running up his spine and spreading out over his face. He thought of great oak trees; of Buzzard Mountain. And well might he think of great things, so mightily did Peter Rhodes tower on the little knoll. Straight, broad, deep-chested, the mop of brown hair standing up aggressively on his head, he looked more like some ancient Titan clad for prowess, than the Parson of Barren Rocks.

Slowly he inspected his rifle—the tube, the cap, the sights. Testingly he placed the stock to his shoulder and glanced down the barrel.

"All ready, Parson," Bill Tools announced.

Slowly he placed the rifle to his shoulder, his left foot thrust far forward. To Ben the small silver bead on the end of the barrel shone like a ray of white light; for Ben was watching the muzzle of the gun. Well he knew that if his father were the slightest bit nervous the muzzle would tremble slightly. But it seemed unusually still.

The shot was fired, and instantly a large round hole was cut in the paddle not far from the black spot. The crowd breathed.

"Dang me, what a shot," Bill Tools murmured.

When Samuel Aked stepped on the mound, it was with an air of absolute unconcern. But it was not indifference. The crowd knew better than that. It was confidence—perfect absolute confidence. The way he threw the gun to his shoulder and took aim, made Ben's heart sink, for well he knew the deadliness of that indifferent attitude.

At the report of his rifle, a second hole appeared in the paddle, a little under and slightly nearer the black spot than was the mark of Peter Rhodes. The crowd gasped. With a hint of a smile, Aked stepped down.

Peter Rhodes looked grave as he made ready for the second shot. But Ben could not detect the slightest tremor of the rifle barrel. There was no tremor there. The bullet nicked half its diameter out of the black spot, Off-hand and at one hundred and twenty paces!

Samuel Aked did not excel it. His shot went a fraction of an inch wild. The first match was a tie, Aked winning the first half and the Parson the second.

The elbow-rest came next. Peter Rhodes sat down on the knoll. He put the elbow of his left arm on his left knee, and rested the gun on his hand.

The great crowd again held its breath. So might some primitive crowd in its vast arena have stood to watch the

battle of its fighting men. For a background, the rugged silent mountains, the trees breathless in the summer heat; on the side lines, the tense faces straining in attention; and in the center, the two contestants, the one finding his aim, the other tall and motionless, oblivious of his surroundings.

The rifle barked, and the blue smoke curled upward, filling the air with the odor of burnt powder. The shot spoke eloquently of the elbow-rest over the off-hand shots, for the uneven hole was cut almost wholly from the black.

A second shot, a third, a fourth and Peter Rhodes had won.

The tension relaxed while preparations for the last test were being made. Ben overheard a spirited conversation.

"Wall, if ye air so sure of hit, why don't ye take me up? I'll bet ye two dollars to yer one that Sam gits hit, yet."

"Shucks, I don't want yer money."

"Don't ye feel sorry fer me, none. Take hit?"

There was no reply. So the man was betting against Peter Rhodes! But agitated as Ben was by the knowledge, Peter Rhodes himself showed no excitement. Carefully he took out his handkerchief, and with it rubbed the bead on his rifle until it caught the rays of the sun and sent them out as little pencils of light. Only once did he look about him. Then his eyes rested on Anne Rhodes, who was standing paralyzed with excitement near the knoll. But when she caught his eye fixed upon her, she answered him with a bright smile.

A heavy block was placed on the knoll. Each shooter would stretch himself out flat behind it, rest his gun upon it, and take a dead rest. This was the surest shot

of all, and yet since each man hoped to pierce the center of the spot, it was as important as the others.

Samuel Aked stretched himself flat on the ground, rested his gun on the block, and sighted for a long time. So long did he sight that he stopped to get his breath. Two men looked at each other significantly.

"Notice that?" one asked.

"A bad sign," the other replied under his breath.

But at the report of the gun, as if by magic a round hole flashed in the black spot, almost in the center. Slowly he arose, looking well content.

"He can't beat hit," he muttered.

"What made ye stop to git yer breath?" some one asked.

"Couldn't jest seem to find 'er."

"Ye had ought to watch that. Know ye shoot better when ye jist glance at hit."

But Peter Rhodes's shot was not as good, and Aked smiled.

"I guess Sam'l has the fust round, Bretheren and Sisteren," Bill Tools announced. "Now comes the last an' final count. Git ready, men."

"Did you put up a new paddle, Bill?"

"Sure. Spick an' span. And now, Bretheren and Sisteren," he continued, "according to our rules, the man winnin' the fust half gits the last shot."

Again Peter Rhodes stretched out behind the block; and this time his shot went dead through the center of the spot. Samuel Aked took his place. When he shot, there was no tell-tale hole. The paddle had but one mark on it. He arose angrily.

"She went dead through the hole he made," he declared. "I know hit. We will have to do 'er over."

"But—but you don't know, and we do know the Parson hit 'er square."

"But I do know. Think I missed the paddle?"

Another paddle was put up; and again Peter Rhodes drove dead through the center.

"Now put up another," Aked ordered.

Another was put in place, and Samuel Aked missed the center by a hair. He stood up. His face was drawn and white. His body drooped as with a great disappointment. But he put out his hand.

"I guess you got me, Parson. But I'd ruther lose to ye than to any other man."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of, Brother."

This little ceremony was always the signal for the crowd to break up. The sharpshooter had been chosen. There was nothing more to be done.

In all directions the people separated. Horses were unhitched, and wild jubilations marked the close of the festivity. The hills claimed their own.

Ben looked for Henry; then for Charley and Jennie. He saw Charlie slinking forlornly up the bottom; and Henry he saw walking jubilantly down the road with Jennie by his side. This latter sight called forth his old expression, which doubtless he had first heard from mature lips, but which experience was filling with a meaning for himself.

"Women," he said, "women are inconsistent."

But he did not mean Essie. She walked demurely along beside him, seemingly unconscious of the many remarks hurled in their direction. And he, bolder now by experience, glanced down at her with a feeling of satisfied ownership.

"She is my girl," he exulted to himself. "I've got her, and I'll keep her, too."

They went down the river path in silence. And as this silence continued, Ben was racked for words to break it. He felt a general tightening of his nerve centers, a benumbing constriction. But they passed a clump of pawpaws that gave promise of a rich harvest later on; and the sight of them gave him an idea.

"Do you like pawpaws, Essie?"

"Of course I do, Ben. Everybody does."

"I'll gather all you want for you next fall."

And she understood. Very sweetly she looked up at him.

"Thank you, Ben."

Her voice was soft and reached him like a warm caress. He got her hand in his own; and thus they continued in silence. But now the silence was not oppressive, but vibrant and articulate.

As he made his way up the mountain later toward the New Manse, he heard from far up the river the weird question-call of the hills.

"A-way-ee-he-e-e."

And from some distant ridge he heard an answer, faint but unmistakable.

"A-way-ee-he-e-e!"

And as if the call probed some primordial depth within him that never again would have expression, a great sadness came over Ben. He felt very, very lonely.

Chapter 7

THE WANDERERS

It was a number of days later; and there was a tell-tale buoyancy about Henry's manner as he came out of the house. It did not escape the understanding glance of Ben, who appraised his brother coolly, critically, as the latter would fain have slipped away unobserved.

"Where are you going, Hen?"

"O, just down here."

"You go 'O, just down here' lots lately, don't you, Hen?"

But Henry was not to be detained. With the air of one who fain would stay and discuss the matter should time only permit such a course, he went off down the hill.

And his going left Ben in the company of Little Anne. Ben's experience with Little Anne had been that of a ship long tossed by unfriendly waves, at last being towed into the harbor of peace. At the time of her birth, he had considered her a revelation of ugliness. This ugliness, while general and absolute, to his mind had centered specifically in her nose. That organ, at first but a small red wart on a very wrinkled face, he had looked upon with disgust approaching nausea.

But with the passing of time it straightened out and took to itself form and comeliness. Almost reluctantly Ben at last admitted that with the exception of a slight tendency to pug at the tip, it was a nose of which its owner should have no occasion to be ashamed.

But about the time he began to be reconciled to her looks, another and very disturbing complication set in. She adopted him as her companion, as her caretaker, as her very present help in time of trouble.

This was annoying, extremely annoying. It curtailed his personal liberty, outraged his masculine sensibilities, brought upon him the odium of his associates. At times he fairly wailed at fate because of the indignities heaped upon him; and on rare occasions he swore with his hand raised to high heaven that the situation should not continue to exist.

But it was then that the favorable winds began to blow, the tide turned in his favor, and the ship of his destiny began to move on even keel into the Harbor of Peace. To vary the figure, the lane at last had turned.

For Little Anne developed a fierce loyalty for him, whose value he was not slow to recognize. His cause became her cause, and being the baby of the family she was not without a certain powerful influence. When his ambitions ran counter to parental desire, she stood up for him in a manner so explosive and effective, that he soon came to regard her as a valuable ally. From rebellious tolerance, his manner toward her became that of eager conciliation.

There was almost constant friction between Ben and Henry, growing out of the fact that their desires so often conflicted. And whereas in the olden days Henry's age had insured him a greater cleverness in presenting his side of the arguments to parental ears, so much so that he was often upheld in the wrong while Ben was severely reprimanded in the right, it came to pass that Lit-

tle Anne's tactics often threw the weight of parental authority almost wholly in Ben's favor.

Not that she resorted to clever argument in his behalf. That was not her method. But it was equally if not more effective than argument. For when Henry sought on occasions to intimidate Ben by the many means within his power, Little Anne would begin to scream loudly for parental assistance. And these screams seldom failed to bring a harassed but anxious parent to the scene.

"What is it, Little Anne?" would be asked, a stern eye fixed meanwhile on Henry.

"Make Henry stop!"

"What are you doing to her, Henry?"

And with the disgusted remark that he was doing absolutely nothing, Henry would recognize his defeat.

It was for reasons such as these that the relations between Ben and Little Anne came to be more and more congenial. She possessed an uncanny power of reading Henry's most secret desires; and this fact often placed a powerful instrument in Ben's hands.

On the present occasion, as Henry started a little too precipitantly down the hill, Little Anne came out and joined Ben.

"He's going to see Jennie," she informed him.

"How do you know?"

"You wait and see," she answered sagely.

But when Henry came home hours later, it was not as one who had spent the gladsome hours in the company of the one woman. He was jaded, dispirited, weary.

"She has given him the mitten," Little Anne said complacently.

"Who? What?"

"Jennie's sent him home."

. This information gave Ben a distinct advantage when he later found Henry sitting dejectedly in the woodyard.

"Too bad, Hen," he began with exaggerated sympathy.

"What's too bad?" He jerked the words out with the fierce aggravation of one who realizes his soul's secret has been betrayed into unsympathetic hands.

"That she threw you over."

"Who said anyone 'threw me over'? Though when will you learn not to use slang?"

"I would not mind it, though. Women are all inconsistent."

"I tell you, she did nothing of the kind."

"It's no use denying it, Hen." His cocksureness was maddening. "But she may come round all right, in time."

"That shows how much you know," Hen broke out passionately. "She is simply going away for a few months. It broke her all up to leave me. That is what is the matter. I just feel sorry for her."

Ben thought shrewdly on his own experience: How Essie had seemingly been heartbroken when he left for school at Sistersville; and how she seemed actually peeved when he returned.

"Don't be too sure. I've known cases like this. Chances are she will go away and get some one else the first week."

Henry received this sage prediction in moody silence. Clearly it was a thought not altogether new to him. But he soon rallied.

"Don't you believe it!"

"Where is she going, anyway?"

Henry waved his hand largely to include all the watershed of Elk river in its westerly ramifications.

"O, up the river."

"How long will she be gone?"

"Long time. Fall, maybe."

"Dangerous business." and Ben left him.

The days passed into weeks, and with their passing Henry lost all his old jauntiness and became moody, taciturn, restless. At the end of the third week his philosophy of life was undoubtedly Schopenhauerian.

"I tell you, Ben, it is monotonous around here. Same old thing, day after day, day after day. No change, no excitement, no nothing. We surely lead a narrow life here."

"When will she be back?" Little Anne cut in.

"What are you talking about?" and Henry's voice actually quavered so great was his vexation. "When will what be back?"

Then of a sudden one day, he brightened up. He seemed reinvigorated by a new and pleasing idea. He smiled frequently, whistled about the house—and at last took Ben into his confidence.

"Ben," he began confidentially, "do you remember how Daniel Boone went out from home and tramped through the wilderness, taking no provisions with him, but killing his game wild and cooking it by the camp fire? I tell you what, there is nothing like a life of that kind!"

To this Ben assented with a passion that evidently had its source in the very fundaments of his being.

"Now, let me tell you," Henry continued. "The corn is laid by, and we have nothing to do here. I think it is time for us to begin to live. Why not start out from here some morning—and to-morrow is as good a time

as any—and tramp through the woods, sleeping where we happen to be when it gets dark, killing wild game for our meals, and having a general good time!"

"An afternoon would do to start, wouldn't it?"

"But morning is better. What do you say?"

Ben fairly pranced around in his eagerness, as he did when greatly excited.

"Where will we go?"

Henry waved his hand largely to include all the watershed of Elk river in its westerly ramifications.

"O, up the river."

"But the hunting is better farther north."

"But the fish. We must have fish."

"Just as well give them a free hand, Anne," Peter Rhodes was saying late that night. "They will never be satisfied until they have tried it. Mark my word, they will be glad to get back."

"But—but," then she hesitated, sighing, "maybe you are right."

"Anne, if you give a colt enough rope, he will usually tie himself. Maybe if you spare the rod you spoil the child; but it's a great thing to put the rod in the child's own hands."

The next morning Ben dressed himself in his oldest clothes.

"No use putting on anything fancy," he declared.

But Henry made no reply. Instead, he dressed carefully, not putting on exactly his best, but at least regaling himself in his next best and contriving to impart a modish look to his apparel.

"What you duding up that way for, Hen?"

"O, nothing."

Ben was for starting out without breakfast, but when the kitchen aroma reached his nostrils, he was docile in capitulating to Henry's more practical suggestion. While they ate Anne Rhodes was busy at the stove; and before they finished she brought a warm package to the table.

"Here is a little bite for your dinner, boys."

Ben was violent in vetoing the suggestion.

"We don't want anything but the twenty-two, some fish hooks and a little salt. Who ever heard of Daniel Boone's packing a lunch?" and in the end he had his way.

As they were leaving the door, Little Anne appeared. There was the suspicion of tears in her eyes, and she regarded Henry resentfully, as though he were responsible for this, to her, unwelcome event. She went toward him spitefully.

"How far up the river is she visiting?" she asked.

Henry gaped at her, then turned away without a word.

"What's that, Little Anne?" Ben queried suspiciously.

"Don't pay any attention to her," Henry countered depreciatingly, clearly eager to be gone.

"I know. I know-" she began again.

"Now, Little Anne, you be still," her mother reproved.

Together they went down the hill and started up the river. Scarce half a mile had they traveled when a chipmunk started up from their path and scampered on ahead, tail high.

"No use to fool with him," Ben said loftily.

"Maybe we had as well get him. The more the merrier," was Henry's more precautionary verdict.

It was but the work of a moment, and the chipmunk was in Ben's pocket.

"Almost a shame to bother with him, though," he said.

"Six of them, and we will have a meal as good as baked quail."

The first few miles lay along the river, and it was indeed a joyful pair that traveled the familiar path. Big beech and sycamore formed a green arch overhead, and there was no sound save the occasional plash of a dew drop as it slid from the tip of some blue-green leaf and splattered on the cool road.

The earth was pleasant to Ben's bare feet. More than once he gathered up little particles of it with his toes and flipped them ahead of him.

Henry had worn his congress shoes, much to Ben's dismay. But he walked sprightly, nevertheless, his face serene with desire in process of gratification.

But as the day advanced, the road left the river and ascended a high hill, where it followed the ridge for miles. And up here there was not the friendly arch of green boughs overhead. The timber had been cleared away; and the sun beat with white rays on the pale dust of the road hot to Ben's feet.

The squirrels had failed to seek them out with the friendly solicitude the two had seemingly expected. The lone chipmunk was the only article in Ben's pocket stored against a hungry hour.

The sun accomplished its task on that day with its accustomed efficiency. It tipped the meridian, and also tipped Henry's hat far back on his head. The afternoon wore on. There was no predominant sound; but when Ben stopped to listen, he could hear the distant twitter of birds, the uneven hum of insects, the audible silence of a summer's day.

Hen began to limp slightly. When he spoke a querulous note had crept into his voice.

114 Singing Mountains

"I don't know how you feel. But as for me, I am getting hungry. That sun is awful."

"Does your shoe pinch some?"

"Not except when I walk straight. That's why I lean over a little."

He was bending rather stiffly to the left.

"It's fine barefooted."

"Let's sit down and rest."

After a little he spoke again.

"That one chipmunk won't make a bite. What will we do for something to eat?"

"If we had gone toward the north, we would have killed plenty of squirrels. And it's not too late yet. What are we following this road for, I'd like to know? Let's go north."

"The road's better. It is easier to walk in."

"Look here," Ben broke out, himself querulous now. "What's the use of tramping up this hot road? We'll find no game along it!"

"I tell you what we will do. We will go on up the road, and stop at the next house and ask for something to eat."

"But that is begging. What would father say?"

"Begging it may be; but I am hungry. Besides, no one need know who we are."

"You have got to try it first, then."

"Maybe you would have better luck. You look worse."

"But I won't-and I don't."

"All right. I'll do it."

And Ben, resolving that if iniquity had to be practiced he would benefit by it, drove a bargain.

"And you'll divide up—half and half?"

"Half and half."

The first house they approached was a small affair set well back from the road. A little old man, with white hair and long beard, sat just outside the doorway. His little legs barely reached the ground; his hands were clasped about the head of a crooked cane upright between his knees. His beard was liberally streaked with tobacco juice, and he chewed a portion of the weed with the short jerky manner of an arrested sheep. His appearance was particularly crabbed. One glance at him and Henry hung back.

"Go on, now. You know what you promised," Ben prompted.

Slowly Hen approached. The front door was open, and inside a woman could be seen bustling about. Henry addressed her.

"Madam, could you give me a bite to eat?"

"What's that?" she asked, coming to the door and eying him with heavy disapproval.

"Could you give me a little bite to eat?" he repeated humbly.

"What do you say, Lige?" addressing the little man.

He levelled a pale eye at Henry, never for a moment ceasing his nervous snappy chewing.

"We don't run a hotel, young man," he snapped shortly, and again fixing his eye on space went ahead with what seemed to be his one serious occupation. The woman grinned maliciously.

Henry looked as if he would consider it a kindness of mother earth to open and swallow him down quickly and completely.

Ben tittered.

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The little man heard. Again he froze Henry with a pale eye.

"Clear out, young man."

"A house up there," Ben informed him, pointing, after they had travelled perhaps a mile. "Go up to it. Maybe you will be more successful."

"I won't do it," in ominous tone. "You will go or I'll know the reason why."

The tone determined Ben.

"Lady, could you give a hungry man a little dinner?" he asked meekly of the tired woman who came to the door.

She seemed genuinely glad to see him.

"You want yer dinner?"

"If you please, lady."

"Now ye jist cut me some stove-wood over to the pile there, an' I'll gin ye a snack."

She pointed to a large wood pile, and Ben approached it. It was clear to his experienced eye that some one had culled over the lot. The soft chestnut had been broken up; splinters had been pulled from the heavier split logs. All that remained were the hard and knotty pieces.

He glanced at the poleaxe; lifted it; gave it close inspection. The blade was rusty and dull. A gap was broken from the near side. He looked back over his shoulder. The woman was not in sight. Quickly he laid down the axe and ran to the road.

"Not me!" he declared with emotion.

The two proceeded.

"But why didn't you chop a few sticks? We will have to get something to eat pretty soon."

Before they had gone much further, Henry slipped off his congress shoes and slung them over his shoulder.

"They don't pinch much, but I might as well save them."

"It's your turn next," Ben reminded him.

Dolefully Henry approached the next house. A woman was in the back yard, fingering an immense rag carpet that was thrown over a tight wire line.

"I'd like it, madam, if you could give me a little grub for myself and brother," pointing to Ben who sat by the roadside looking down upon them. "We are very hungry."

"Of course, you poor boys. You jist beat this here carpet a minnit, while I go in and git ye some good pone." She handed a flail to Henry and moved quickly away.

With a despairing glance about him, as if seeking balm in a new Gilead, he inspected the carpet. From his seat by the roadside Ben looked with keen relish at the scene below him. Henry's strong aversion to work was not unknown to him. And dust! it was Henry's special nightmare. He gave the carpet a vicious stroke with the flail, and a thick cloud enveloped him. Ben changed his position so he could see more clearly.

With the patience of despair Henry beat the carpet. Sweat stood out in little beads on his forehead, and even from his distance, Ben saw that dust was settling on his moist face, giving it a splotchy appearance.

He stopped beating and looked toward the door through which the woman had disappeared. There was no sign of her. He beat again and again turned toward the door. Alternately he beat and stopped, the stops becoming more and more frequent and prolonged. Once Ben saw the woman peep cautiously out of the door, but he made no sign.

Henry squatted down. Jerking himself erect, he tossed the flail high in the air. He watched it mount, turn, fall back to earth. His expression was unusually hard and cynical.

Singing Mountains

118

"Poof! Take your old carpet and your old flail and your old pone. I'm done."

"Some people, Ben," when they were quite a way up the road, "some people are hogs. And if there ever was a hog, that woman's it."

"Pretty dusty work, Hen. Look at your shirt."

And sure enough, the shirt he had donned with such care was now a dirty brown.

There were no more houses in a long distance. Evening came before they espied a large rambling old structure, surrounded by much shrubbery and great oak trees. It had an air of being remarkably well-kept.

"Now you go in there, and don't come back to me until you have plenty to eat."

Ben went. On the porch a man was sitting, clothed in brown jeans and blue shirt. He was a large man, but looked very kind.

"Mister, I am very hungry. Can you give me something to eat?" Ben's manner had in it nothing of the cocksureness of the morning.

The man seemed interested.

The man seemed interes

"Travelled far?"

"Come all the way from-Ohio," Ben told him.

"Been working out there?"

"Yes. But we got laid off, and are trying to get home."

"I am acquainted in Ohio some. What county are you from?"

Ben did not know the name of a county in Ohio. He squirmed uneasily. The man's honest eyes were on him frankly.

"O, we just worked around from place to place. No regular county."

"Some one with you?"

"My brother. He waited out in the road. He was too tired to walk in."

Ben was suddenly filled with compassion for himself and his poor brother, who had been unjustly laid off from work out in Ohio, and had travelled far to reach the old home. When he spoke his voice carried a pleading note.

"It is hard. Do you think you could give us a little to eat?"

"That I can, sir. Mary," and he called into the house, "get a bite ready for two men. Now, young man, go out and get your brother and come in and eat."

From this suggestion Ben recoiled. Henry did not know they had come from Ohio; and Ben saw terrible complications in his presence.

"I—I am afraid he would rather not come in. He—he doesn't look very well. If you could give me a bite, I would take it out."

"Well, you can eat yourself, and we will send him something."

Soon he was taken into the house and placed at a long table. On it were hot pone, roasting ears, yellow butter, jam, cold meat, a large cup of coffee.

"We've just had our supper," a motherly woman explained apologetically, "but you are welcome to what there is left."

"We are sorry your brother cannot come in. But Mary'll fix him up something." The man spoke gravely.

Ben contemplated the feast before him with unhurried eye. He was warmed by a sense of peace. Very completely did he eat, becoming largely tolerant near the end.

Glancing through the front door, he made out a shadowy form moving stealthily toward the house. He recognized Henry. He came nearer, and stood looking intently at Ben from behind an oak tree. Withdrawing his gaze from the yard, Ben picked up a long ear of corn and covered it with yellow butter.

"Thank you very much," he said loudly, preparing to take a mouthful of the corn. "I am sure my brother will appreciate it. But don't put yourself to any trouble. Just a little will tide him over."

He glanced again through the door. The apparition by the tree was gesticulating wildly.

"Just a little will do him," he repeated.

When he was completely finished, he pushed back.

"Will you put up with us over night?"

"No. I will have to go on now. But I thank you for the good supper."

The woman placed a heavy package in his hand.

"There! I hope he will like it," she said.

On opening it, Henry discovered that the paper contained two ears of corn, buttered and salted; four young onions; three slices of cold meat; a big piece of pone, slit through the middle and soaked with butter. When he had finished it, he stretched out comfortably.

"Ben," he remarked, "there are a lot of fine people in this old world, after all."

"There surely are."

And while they had no need to be a-begging, and inwardly admitted that in strict justice they should have been turned away from this hospitable door, they nevertheless felt a warming toward these people—a willingness to help them if it should ever be possible.

The night they spent on the river bank, having descended from the ridge farther back. A log served them as pillow, and the bare earth was their couch. Both were somewhat sore and disheveled when they took the road the next morning.

"I tell you, Hen," Ben argued feelingly, "there is no

use to keep plugging on up this road. There is no game along it. What we want to do is to take to the woods."

"But this is the only way. It is lots better than out in the woods. Where could we get anything to eat out there?"

But Ben had had his suspicions for some time.

"Now you look here. Why do you want to keep on the road?" he demanded flatly.

"Just because it's better."

"Then I quit. It is not better. You go on. I will go north through the woods."

"You'd be afraid."

For answer, Ben took the paper of salt from his pocket, divided it and gave Henry half. The misshapen chipmunk he threw on the ground.

"There, now. I give you half. You go on. I will take the gun and do some real hunting."

"Don't, Bennie. It wouldn't be half the fun alone."

"Good-by, Hen."

"Wait a minute, Ben."

"Well?"

"Say, Ben, I want to tell you something. Jennie Jones is visiting on up the river. If we ever get there we can get all we want to eat and have a good time, too."

The information that once again he might have all he wanted to eat moved Ben strongly.

"How long will it take?" he demanded, relenting somewhat.

"We ought to make it by evening."

'Come on, then."

But they did not make it that evening. Instead, they lay out in a bed of leaves, and forged on again the next day. By dint of much strategy they managed to get a little to eat and so kept on.

Singing Mountains

It was afternoon of the third day when they topped a hill and made out a house in a large clearing in the bottom below them.

"There it is," Hen announced, great relief in his tone.

"But-what are you going to do now we are here?"

"I am going down."

122

"Not like that, surely."

"Like-like what?"

"Why—look at you! Your shoes are a sight, and so is your shirt—all that carpet dirt and sleeping out. And your—face," and here Ben broke out in loud laughter.

Henry seemed astonished.

"Is my face dirty?"

"Dirty? It is just horrible. There is dirt all over it; and your beard is just a long fuzz!"

This reference to his beard under normal circumstances would have gratified Henry tremendously. But in the present situation it perturbed him.

"As I see it, we had just as well go back," Ben continued moodily.

"We will not go back."

"Then what will you do?"

"I will get along."

Jennie was indeed in the big house in the clearing. She was visiting the Davises, and the prosperous place in the bottom was their dwelling.

The first few days in the new surroundings had passed very pleasantly for Jennie. But as if corresponding to Henry's restlessness at Barren Rocks, she soon lost interest in her Uncle and his family and began to pine for something else.

The afternoon that found Henry sitting dolefully on the mountain above her, found her in an upstairs room writing industriously. Many were the pages she covered with closely written lines; and many were the sighs that punctuated her periods.

In the midst of a paragraph she sighed. The pen stock was carried to her lips by a pensive hand. Thus she sat, eyes wide but unseeing, save as she looked down the vista of dreams.

Jennie was small. When she stood half on tip-toe, as she usually did when being measured—rising furtively, impishly—she came but to Henry's shoulders.

In visualizing her one usually thought of the impish mischievous look of her eyes, or the velvet softness of her oval cheeks, or the fluffy yellow-gold of her hair. And uniformly there hung about her a faint sweet oriental fragrance.

She sighed again; dropped her head on the table until her soft hair gave fragrance to the pages.

"I wish I had not come," she breathed.

Dusk had settled by the time supper was over and the table cleared away, but she was restless with a vague discontent. The soft evening called to her with its amorous voices.

"I am going for a walk," she exclaimed suddenly, gaily.

"And I will go, too, won't I?" It was Hazel Davis.

"Please, Hazie, I believe I will just go by myself. I am just going a little piece." And Hazel, seeing, understood.

"Why didn't you ask him up?" she whispered.

"O, Hazie!" as if to brush the suggestion aside, but there was a loneliness in her voice.

"Think him over," Hazel suggested hastily, herself starry-eyed at this heart affair the like of which had never come to her. "Just think hard, and maybe he will come." Her fifteen years had brought the usual wisdom.

"M-maybe."

"Don't be gone long.'

"I'll take Carlo with me," and in response to her call the great mongrel dog came bounding to her side. "Come on, Carlo. We are going for a walk."

And just about the time she was leaving the house a very lonesome and disheveled figure, limping in a pair of very dusty congress shoes, crept down the mountain side and approached the house from behind.

"I can't go in, I reckon. But I can go down near. Maybe I can see her, anyway."

There was an orchard back of the house, and he found himself erelong under a great apple tree. Coincidence would have it that it was through this orchard that Jennie had chosen to walk.

"If I can let her know in some way I have been here and gone away without seeing her, it will break her all up," Henry mused with a certain pleasure.

He peered eagerly in the direction of the house, hoping to get a glimpse of a certain face at the window. He saw instead, at a considerable distance below him, a shadowy figure moving in the gathering dusk. He thought she walked with a pensive air, as if her thoughts were dreams. For he recognized her. It was Jennie!

He forgot everything: forgot his dirty shirt; the uncut fuzz on his face; forgot even the pinch of the congress shoes. He thought only of the slim girl below him.

"Jennie!" he cried in a hoarse whisper, trying to attract her attention without discovering himself to the household. But she did not hear.

"Jennie!" he muffled again.

To his amazement, a large uncouth body disengaged itself from her side and stalked toward him, emitting an ominous growl as it came.

"What is it, Carlo?" Jennie's voice asked, frightened. The answer was a growl, higher pitched and fiercer than before. With the hair standing up on its back, the big mongrel walked tense and pugnacious toward Henry.

To Henry's terrified glance the animal seemed but little smaller than a yearling colt. For a moment he was paralyzed with fright; then he gestured threateningly, hoping to scare the dog back without making a noise.

But the dog was true to its hybrid strain. Lifting its lip to lay bare the fangs, it came at him mouth open. At one leap Henry reached a limb above him and drew himself up. There was the sound of snapping and heavy breathing beneath him.

Tennie screamed.

In a moment the anxious form of Wade Davis loomed out of the doorway. He was followed by the others. It was by now quite dark.

"What is it, Jennie?" Davis called, hurrying.

"O—O—" the frightened voice answered him, "there's something up there. Carlo is after it! There, I see it. Look!"

At this period Carlo seemed to forget his prey in the tree, for he lunged wildly into the woods.

"He's after it! He's after it!" Jennie shrieked.

Quickly Wade Davis followed the dog. Then from a distance up the mountain came the sounds of a struggle. There was a thrashing about in the underbrush. Excited voices mingled with the growling of the dog.

"Get away from here!"

There was a slight yelp.

"Get back there before I shoot you," the listeners below heard.

"It's a man!" Hazel Davis cried. "O, Jen, think of you out here alone."

"Maybe it's a robber!" Mrs. Davis shuddered.

"Take that!" the voice roared.

Suddenly Jennie's jaw dropped.

"Why—that voice——" she began in a puzzled tone.

The dog howled as if in sharp pain.

"That'll fix you!"

"O, he's killing Carlo."

But it was not so. After an interval of silence, a very chastened Carlo, tail between his legs, crept down from the hill and timidly approached the group. Something had driven from his spleen all pugnacious tendencies, and from his consciousness all thought of the figure in the tree.

Wade Davis soon came back.

"There was somebody up there, but I can't find him. Where was he first, Jennie?" He asked the question with a certain pugnacity that indicated a willingness to lay all blame for the fiasco upon Jennie's excitability.

"Right up there in the orchard—somewhere," she hesitated, catching the pugnacity.

"Bring a light, mother, and I'll look around some."

Very cautiously Henry eased himself further into the protection of the friendly branches. To declare himself now was impossible. He shrank from the stern just eye of Wade Davis. Besides. . . .

Devoutly he thanked heaven for the interruption that had taken the dog away from him. He had no delusions about the other night prowler to whom the dog had been attracted. He knew him. But it was lucky, just at that time.

The lantern threw a ruddy ghostly light among the trees. In the dim light of it, Wade Davis looked like some terrible avenger, merciless in his justness.

Henry held his breath, taking it in slowly and letting it out with wide open mouth. Desperately he tried to still the beating of his heart.

Wade Davis came very near.

"That looks like a track," he muttered. "Turned toward the house, too. The scoundrel was making toward the house, mother. . . . We must leave Carlo out after this. . . . It stopped here—right here by this tree.

"Is this where you first saw it, Jennie? O, you didn't?... And here it turns.... Yes, this is the place. That heel print digs in. He turned here. Right here by this tree!"

He placed a hand against the tree and held the lantern out, scrutinizing the ground. For one long minute he looked about him; and for that minute Henry held his breath. Then he let the lantern drop to his side.

"Guess we can't do anything here to-night. I'll look around some more to-morrow."

They all followed him, closely, toward the house. Henry waited only to make sure they were within; then he climbed down quickly and ran into the woods.

He found Ben where he had left him, only it was a very angry and outraged young man who awaited him.

"Now you've done it!" he snorted. "Slipped down there and turned that—that devil of a dog loose on me." He halted slightly at the unaccustomed profanity, then smirked with pleasure at it.

"He lunged at me. And if I hadn't been just a little too quick for him he would have killed me." But with all his anger he uttered these words with pride.

"Did I brain him?" he asked loudly. "Well, I guess so. I tell you that dog won't soon forget me. And now I'm going home. You can stay just as long as you please."

But Henry did not seem inclined to prolong his stay. It was fairly plain that with him there had been an hiatus between hope and reality.

Slowly, painfully, he pulled off his congress shoes, stood up, cast a wistful look at the now quiet valley below, and followed Ben down the road.

It soon became apparent that Henry had whereof to speak. He became rather flattering and confidential.

"Bennie, we have lots of fun together, don't we?"
"Uhuh."

"We keep each other's secrets, don't we!"

This appealed to Ben—this having secrets forever locked from the world.

"You bet we do!" he agreed feelingly.

"And we will never say a word about to-night, will we?"

"Never."

"I do wonder what has become of those boys?" Anne Rhodes was asking anxiously.

"They stood it a little longer than I thought they would," Peter Rhodes answered her, though there was no anxiety about him. "Mark my word, though, you will soon see them. And we will hear no more about Daniel Boone!"

It was on that very day, while they sat in the shadow of the house, that Shep bounded joyously down the path. Looking down the hill, Ben was seen coming wearily up, and behind him, limping painfully, was Henry.

Peter Rhodes became vastly pompous and cordial.

"Hello, Daniel," he boomed. "We are glad to have you back with us. . . . And who is your friend? Perhaps a Redskin you have captured? Well, well, well, bring him in. Glad to see him."

But to this hearty welcome, there was vouchsafed no reply. Ben smiled rather wanly, while Henry entered the house with a grim look on his face.

Anne Rhodes followed them within, and to her Ben spoke his first words, with humility and respect.

"Mother, is there anything to eat?"

Chapter 8

IN THE VALLEY OF THE MOON

HAVE you ever heard how Elk river received its name; and have you heard the story of the Valley of the Moon? Ben heard it first from Mother; and I had better tell it as he heard it that first evening, sitting in by the table on which burned the newly cleaned lamp.

Actually, Mother was Ben's grandmother, but since he had two grandmothers, one was called Mother to distinguish her from the other; and when a member of the Rhodes household spoke of Mother, the word was pronounced with a peculiar accent that left no occasion whatever for confusing her with Anne Rhodes.

Mother was a great hand to tend sick people. She was capable, filled with enormous energy, and was inclined, to take hold of any situation with a capable hand.

When she arrived at a home where there was sickness and accordingly disorder, she had a way of expressing herself in Indian-like gutturals, of throwing up her hands in a gesture that cowed the household, and then of getting right to work at putting things in order.

I have suspicioned that, while she seemed to have absolutely no patience with such a slipshod method of domestic science as permitted confusion worse confounded to reign, if the truth were known, nothing ever gave her such lasting satisfaction as to map out a program of house cleaning, reduce everything to a temporary sham-

ble, clean it thoroughly, and then put it back in place, fairly glistening in its new cleanliness.

When all the cleaning was done she would go about her duties with soft countenance on which utter contentment sat, moving here and there with serene step, knowing everything was in its place, and knowing it was clean.

When she came to visit Peter Rhodes on the various occasions, Ben endured the period of house cleaning with shrinking uneasiness; Henry disappeared altogether; and many people long unvisited made sudden and imperative demands on Peter Rhodes' time.

But when all was again put in order the family settled down with a fresh comfortable sense of order. Especially Ben enjoyed this new period; and of evenings more than any other time. For always the chairs were in order, ever the lamp glowed softly through the paperpolished chimney, and the circle of soft light beckoned invitingly.

Mother always sat near the lamp. And she knitted constantly. Her face glowed softly, and her voice when she spoke held a velvet purring note.

It was on such an evening as this, when Anne Rhodes, perfectly attended, lay on the bed in the small bedroom of the new Manse and Peter Rhodes was away at the Shoals appointment, that Ben drew his low hickory-bottomed chair up to the circle of light and heard the story of the Valley of the Moon, Little Anne soft eyed and contented beside him.

Very softly did Mother speak, and strange was the tale she told. Perhaps she had got it from her own mother; perhaps the Indians had left it as a legend beloved. Perhaps—who knows?—it had come to her from out the silence as she had sat and contemplated the river itself.

"They have got to distinguishing in these days between the moose and the elk and the deer," she began impatiently. "But for such distinctions I care not at all. All should be called Elk, Ben.

"I like the name. There is something about it like the open places, like the wide forests before they were cleared off. Elk makes me think of lush green feeding grounds. There is no name that fits him like the Elk, Ben. You should never use another. . . .

"Yes, there were times of famine in those days. Times when the rain did not fall, and the leaves curled up and rattled with the hot breath of the ground.

"But there was this time in particular," speaking with the hiatus of personal conversation. "For months it had not rained, and all the elk came down from the mountains to the valleys. They were parched for water. The grass was not wet with dew of mornings as it is these days. The elk grazed on dry grass turning brown.

"Many died, and their ribs stuck up white in the sun. But there was one herd ruled over by a great stag called Scar Face. Ben, if you only might have seen this here Scar Face!

"He was a magnificent elk, tall and fleet of foot. He stood up straight and fearless, his wide antlers rising in broad sweep from the brown of his forehead. Across his snout was a long purple scar. O," catching Ben's interrogation, "he was a fighter, all right!

"Scar Face led his herd with great sagacity and foresight. He seemed able to sense the superior feeding grounds, and to them he led his cows far in advance of the others. Consequently, they thrived. While the ribs of other cows turned brittle in the sun, Scar Face's herd was glossy of coat and their bellies were full."

Ben liked for Mother to use big words and not stop to

explain their meaning, as Peter Rhodes always would do. There was something about big words that he did not understand that made stories better. And he really could understand, too.

"But there came a time when even Scar Face could no longer find food for his cows. The bottom marshes caked hard, and the marsh grass was brittle and dry.

"The little ones suffered first. Eagerly they grasped the teats only to find the udders dry. They turned away still hungry. The cows looked to Scar Face for relief; and his helplessness drove him desperate. Far did he travel, and tirelessly did he tramp the valleys. But the waiting cows did not hear his summons. He would return, himself unfed.

"Do you remember, Ben, the sand bar two miles up the river, the bar that runs far out into the river, the stones white and clean? Yes? Well, that far Scar Face led his herd. But they could go no further. They stopped there, under the waterbirch.

"Long did Scar Face regard them, and as he looked his heart turned to wormwood within him. His loved ones were dying!"

Here her needles went in and out very slowly; the suspicion of moisture was in her eyes. In the slight pause Ben visualized old Scar Face, with pointed hips and drooping snout, mournfully contemplating his cows.

"But did he give up?" she continued fiercely. "He did not. He drew himself up. He faced the cleft in the hills above him, lifted his head aggressively, and bellowed forth his challenge to the elements. Then he shook his antlers and vanished.

"On and on he traveled, nor stopped on the way at all. At last he could scarcely place one foot before the other. His knees wabbled under him; a pink mist swam before

his eyes. . . . Can't you see him, Ben? . . . He staggered, he fell. But he got up again and pushed on.

"Finally he came to the great Divide, where the hills slope no longer toward the south-east but toward the south-west. He heard a rumbling in the ground beneath his feet. It was unmistakable—it was water. Desperately, with all his remaining strength, he began to paw up the earth.

"He was successful. Soon he could see the water rising from a hidden spring and falling again into an underground cavity. And, Ben, just as he was bending to bury his snout in it, he died and fell into that underground cavity.

"Thus Scar Face perished... But somehow he released the water. His body filled the cavity so that it could no longer escape underground. It rose higher and higher until at last it went singing away to the south-east, murmuring its gladness at the new freedom.

"On it flowed," she continued, her voice now sad, as if her mind still lingered on the fate of the beloved stag, "on and on, touching the parched ground and making it bloom, down to where Scar Face's cows awaited his return. They slaked their thirst in its depth and lived."

The voice trailed away in a sigh. She sat scarcely knitting at all, her eyes meditative. Ben's voice recalled her.

"And then?"

"It was night, my child, when the water reached them," she continued. "And the moon, low over Buzzard Mountain, cut a silver path through the virgin water. This it continues to do, even to this day.

"Have you noticed it, Ben? As soon as the moon tops the mountain, it cuts a silver path through the

waters. Thus is the place called the Valley of the Moon."

"And the river?"

"It is Elk river, Ben," she answered softly. "Scar Face, the great elk, gave his life to make it."

And now I have told you the tale as Mother told it to Ben; and now I shall tell you of the river, and show you the Valley of the Moon.

Elk river it was, and its reality surpassed the romance of its fabled origin. Even from its source far up among the fragrant hills to its very mouth down at the Kanawha, it was a blue ribbon of poetry and delight.

Meandering in wayward quietness, the sport of leaping perch and slender pike, the delight of waterfowl and the rendezvous of mink and muskrat, it wound its way as destiny intended, nor praised nor blamed.

Away back over the years, when Peter and Anne Rhodes had first moved into the old Baptist Manse, they were quick to pick out the one spot of superlative beauty in all the beautiful miles. And this place was the Valley of the Moon.

Two miles above the Manse a white sand bar cut the blue lazy water of the river, a bar flanked on the west by great waterbirch, on the south by a deep blue spring and a towering mountain; on the east a cool brook that twisted from this very spring, and on the north the river itself.

A fire built near this little brook would send a slender pencil of smoke to the highest reaches of the waterbirch; branches cut from these trees and properly arranged, had a way of caressing the body into relaxation and the mind to pleasant dreams. And of course the fishing was good!

It was unwritten law that Peter and Anne Rhodes should spend there one week in every year. It had al-

ways been so, even from that first summer: then just the two of them, but later one by one the children as well, all encamped on the ground under the fragrant waterbirch.

It was some weeks after Ben and Henry had returned from their fateful trip up the river, that Anne Rhodes revealed to her husband what was in her heart.

"Tommy," she said, "it is about time for our week in the Valley."

"Not going to give it up this year?" he asked in feigned surprise, just as he had done for years.

"I am not. And," she continued just a little defiantly, "I am going to do something more. I am going to invite friends."

This indeed was a departure. For it had always been that this week spent in the Valley should be their very own. He did not feign surprise now.

"Invite friends? Why, Anne--"

"I am inviting the Joneses and the Evanses."

"Well, since it had to be somebody——" Relief showed in his voice. "Have you thought of a time for going?"

"I had thought of next Monday."

"And this is Tuesday."

Thus was it settled.

During the week that followed Anne Rhodes was more like her old self than for long past. Again her eyes took on the glow of the stars, there was about her the old out-reaching eagerness, and her laughter tinkled like the sound of a bell over the hills.

"O, I know I have done it before," she said defiantly, answering the teasing comment of Peter Rhodes. "But I never get used to it. I like to sit down there and watch the boys swim. And I like to wade, too, Tommy," low-

ering her voice, "I just love to take off my shoes and wade."

"The wife of the parson!" he exclaimed, regarding her with eyes at whose light she lowered her own with a happy catch of the breath.

"There is only—only one thing," she hesitated, drawing her hand wearily over her forehead.

"Yes?" very gently.

"Of course she had to marry, Tommy. But I wish Margaret was back with me. Somehow——"

"Don't, honey," he protested gently from out the deeps of his own loneliness. It was hard to get along without the child. "I know how it is. But it is better so."

The next day Peter Rhodes slipped down to the store. He got any number of fish hooks: some iron, some blue steel, some short and some long shank; he got new lines enough and to spare. He also bought a fine trot-line, done up in a great ball. Then he went down the river to a place he knew, cut a long pawpaw fishing pole and peeled it.

"Ho, ho!" he cried, returning to the Manse with his burdens. "I guess the Valley will not go so bad for a few days, will it?"

To Ben fell the task of providing the bait. Out back of the stable he dug long and faithfully; and down in the shoals of the river he searched under stones for gallinippers until his can was full. The dough-balls for the trot-line and the chubs for the perch, could be provided later on.

Henry was noncommittal about the expedition, avoiding sedulously all effort in preparation. But when he not only learned that custom was to be set aside to allow of company, but found out just who that company was

to be, his eagerness to be off equalled Ben's, albeit even then he took no hand in the preparations.

It was just after Dog Days, in the first week of September, that the whole party encamped in the Valley of the Moon. Two small tents were set up under the big waterbirch near the sand bar. One was for Martha Jones, Elizabeth Evans and Anne Rhodes; the other for Essie, Little Anne and Jennie.

Yes, Jennie had returned from her trip up the river, returned over the very road that Ben and Henry had traveled, without, however, knowing that they had been over the route. That secret was locked up forever.

As for the men, they cut off cool fragrant boughs from the big waterbirch and piled them high until with the resiliency of springs they held out subtle invitation.

By the cold rivulet whose deposit from the mountain had formed the sand bar, heavy stones were fashioned into a little chimney for cooking, and the Valley of the Moon was inhabited.

"Well, well, well! Now, boys, the next thing to do is to set the trot. The water is pretty clear for cats, but we might get one or two, at that. Ben, you get the bait and we will be off."

Ben paddled up the river, his father seated in the bow.

"Where will we set it, father?"

"Up at the big bend yonder."

On the south side the line was tied to a submerged sycamore root. "Just as well to hide it," Peter Rhodes remarked sagely.

On the other side it was fastened securely to a small sapling. This done, came the work of looping on and baiting the hooks. When they were all on and baited, the sinkers put in place and the line ready to be let down,

Peter Rhodes stood in the bow, holding the cord in his hand.

"Here she goes, Ben. Now, the first one up in the morning goes over it and gets the fish."

He let it sink down.

Secretly Ben resolved that he should be the first one to the line the next morning. And a resolve exactly similar took shape in the mind of Peter Rhodes.

Have you ever gone over a trot-line in the morning when it was newly baited the night before; have you paddled to it in the mist of young daylight; have you put your hands in the warm water and been surprised it should be so warm; and have you held the line low in the water and felt the tug of a big one farther on? Then you can understand.

When they returned to the Valley it still lacked an hour of dusk. Just as Ben was pulling the boat up on the bar he heard a splash in the river below him. He understood: a pike was out foraging for supper.

Eagerly Ben got his pole and line and returned to the boat. While he floated slowly down stream, he baited his hook with a writhing gallinipper. Then he threw in. Almost at once there was a responsive strike, which caused the tip of the pole to spat in the water. But it got off.

"Shucks," Ben philosophized, "it was a little fellow."

He tried again, and this time brought one in, an aggressive goggle-eye. Again and again the hook sank through the water, disguised by a writhing gallinipper. But the big one, of which Ben had dreamed a lifetime, even as every true fisherman dreams, failed to get hooked.

Dusk approached. Small insects flew close down, dropped into the water. Already it was time to go back

to camp. Ben could see the glow of the fire up by the rivulet, could hear the crackle of the flames.

He resolved to make one more try, then go home. This time he culled over the gallinippers. One he found unusually active and fat and large. He slipped the blue steel hook through it and stood up to cast. The line swished through the air and the bait hit the water with a spat, just where a projecting limb hung low.

"There, now. If he wants it, let him get it."

Hardly had the bait hit the water when there was a quick swirl, a sudden flash, and silence. The big one had struck. Ben was certain of it. He knew that the pike bites long, and should be given time. But his eagerness was too great. He jerked.

Immediately the big fish was active. The line cut the water like a knife, moving with the speed of wind toward the boat. Ben pulled heavily, there was a great jerk, a slashing, and the tension relaxed. The big one had cut the line.

Ben sat down quickly. His heart was pounding, his hands were all a-tremble. He was suffocating, smothering. Tears came into his eyes. "And I might have had him," he all but sobbed.

Peter Rhodes later listened to Ben's tale with the look of a man willing to make certain allowances. But when he heard that the line had been cut, he asked to see it. When it was brought, he examined it carefully.

"And it was a new line, too," he pondered, a new note in his voice. Then, "Well, well, well. Men, the boy is right," he said. "There is a big one down there. And—maybe one of us will get him."

"I wouldn't doubt it," said the men, and each one knew precisely who should catch the big fish.

Over the fire a great kettle sputtered. Its dancing lid

lifted to reveal many roasting ears, tender and whole. Corn was on the supper menu.

In the ashes of the fire potatoes were roasting; and deep down in the ashes under the potatoes, was a great covered oven, filled with pone.

"Now you men folks cut sticks for the bacon," Anne Rhodes directed gleefully.

Very carefully Henry selected two good sticks.

"What you getting two for, Hen?"

"Afraid one might burn up."

But Ben saw behind the deception, and himself prepared two sticks instead of one. The one he gave to Essie, who accepted it with an eager little giggle; the other he kept for himself.

Each one roasted bacon as a part of the general fun. It was attached to the sticks and held over the fire until it curled and caught fire, its delicious fragrance filling the air and whetting the appetite. When it was done, it was all piled on a common plate.

The potatoes, greatly shrunk but black and hot, were raked from the ashes. When the black hulls should later be broken, they should but serve as cups for the mealy white potatoes within.

The kettle with the corn was lifted off, and the water having been drained from it, was set within reach of all. Everything was then ready but the pone.

"Now, Tommy, take away the coals so I can get the pone."

The coals were raked away and the big oven laid bare. With great care it was pulled to one side, the lid removed, and the golden smoking pone turned out on a dish.

And that was the supper: The hot pone spread with firm yellow butter that had spent the afternoon immersed

in the spring; corn that was more delicious milk than hard kernel; bacon thinly inserted in the slit pone; potatoes hot from their charred cups. And for the end was reserved a large basket of peaches, firm clings that were juicy and purple within.

Ben began the meal with all the eager selfishness of his age. It was only when he observed Henry's solicitude for Jennie that he became aware of his own opportunity.

For Henry and Jennie were sitting close together, he pressing upon her every attention and she accepting with a shy but intimate grace. He broke her potato open for her and told her just how to cup it out to avoid getting burned. He speared an ear of corn and put it into her pink hand and allowed his fingers to cloy with hers while doing it.

Ben essayed to fix a potato for Essie, but she was quick to demonstrate her ability to take care of herself by securing and breaking open her own. He even tried to edge closer to her, imitating Henry's manner with Jennie. But Essie got up rather unceremoniously and moved to the other side.

He made one final effort when supper was completely finished. "Let's go down on the bar, Essie," he invited in a low voice meant only for her.

"I can't. I must help with the dishes," she answered importantly.

Henry was more fortunate. Jennie clearly considered that there were enough laborers for all tasks, and at a whispered word from Henry the two moved slowly out on the sand bar and sat down near the water. Soon their low-pitched voices floated back to the group that had settled round the fire.

Ben sat near the fire, watching the dying embers as they were covered by the white ashes, now hugging his knees and dreaming, now poking the embers with a short stick.

Essie and Little Anne sat near, the former appearing absorbed in her confidences to Little Anne. Peter Rhodes talked seriously of things Ben could not understand.

Occasionally Jennie's contented laughter floated up from the bar. Down the river a bullfrog bellowed his hoarse bully-rum. On the hill a night bird called. . . .

Ben found his bed on the boughs and closed his eyes on the stars.

Scarcely had he got to sleep, or so it seemed to him, when he heard the voice of his father, raised to a high pitch of jubilation.

"Ho, ho!" it was saying. "And there sleeps the young man who was going to beat me to the trot. Wake up, Ben. Come and see what you missed by not getting there first."

In either hand he held a blue fish, large and ungainly of head but tapering rapidly toward shapely tail, after the manner of blue cats. His fingers were cleverly inserted in their gills.

"Two big blue cats, Ben. Look at them!"

The catfish is hard to kill, and only the expert may do it scientifically. A long hatpin was dexterously inserted in the miniature depression on the flat head of each fish, and pushed steadily backward along the spine. In each case there was a slight quiver, a lifting of the fleshy horns and the work was done. Hot water was then poured over them, the blue segment disintegrated, and they were ready.

While the fish were being cleaned, Ben slipped down to the river, took off his shirt and trousers and plunged into the water. He swam out a ways, turned and came back. Henry had assured him that this was an excellent way to begin the day. Ben himself had heard it was from other sources, but now tested it out with doubtful relish.

When he had put on his clothes again, he was more doubtful than ever of the efficacy of an early plunge. He was very wet; his clothing stuck to his body, and in the deep shade of the heavy waterbirch he shivered with cold.

Henry came down to the water, inserted a thumb under a suspender as if about to disrobe, but hesitated. He stooped and put a hand in the water, then straightened and yawned comfortably.

Ben was watching him with mounting disgust. "Jump in," he scoffed derisively. "That's the way they told you to begin the day over at your great school." Ben smarted at the very thought of Sistersville.

Henry started at Ben's first words, then turned to look indolently at him. "You been in?" he asked curiously, for Ben had shivered violently.

"Sure. It's fine. Get in."

Henry shrugged. "Guess not to-day," he said.

Up by the fire the thick white slices of fish were sprinkled lightly with meal and laid on smoking pans. Coffee was made in the large tin pot. The big oven was again laid bare and made to yield up its pone. Breakfast was then ready in the Valley. Henry and Ben hurried up.

After breakfast, each could choose to pass the day as he wished. Ben went up the river, climbed high in a great sycamore and settled himself comfortably in its branches. The sun warmed him. Besides, he was a dreamer of dreams; and the high and friendly sycamore afforded him a vantage ground from which to survey the

surrounding slopes and people them to his imagination.

He had been there an hour, perhaps a little more. It was hard by ten o'clock. Chancing to glance up the river he beheld a sight so strange and impossible that at first sight he could not credit his very eyes.

Henry was coming down the river in a boat. And he actually seemed to be paddling with zest. So unlike Henry was this show of effort that Ben waited for nearer vision to assure him. But it was Henry. And behold, here was mystery.

It was not until the boat was opposite him that Ben fathomed the mystery. Henry was in the stern wielding the heavy paddle with the zest of a strong man to run a race. And behind him, holding to a slender rope attached to the rear, Jennie Jones was slipping through the blue water with the supple grace of a mermaid.

"Do you like it?" Henry smiled back at her, with such joy on his face as Ben had not beheld there before.

For answer she took of the blue water into her mouth, puckered her pink lips into a ridiculously small circle, and squirted a little stream of water at him. The act was wholly naïve, spontaneous, sportive.

Henry laid down his paddle and turned to face her. She divined his intention and dropped back the extreme limit of the rope.

"How dare you, sir," she tinkled. "I shall sink."

But Henry failed to see any immediate danger. He pulled on the little rope and brought her closer. Under her arms he placed his hands and lifted her up. Around her head was wound a turban of pink, from beneath which wayward tendrils of hair had escaped and hugged her neck. Her face was a rosy pink as Henry brought it close to his.

"Now, I-will!" he said.

Singing Mountains

With one graceful movement her supple body was free. She sank wholly from sight, the pink turban disappearing completely. Henry stood staring, mouth open.

Almost immediately the pink turban bobbed up some twenty feet from the boat, whither she had dived with the ease of a young dipper.

"Now, you-won't!" and she splashed him.

The tableau filled Ben with a certain strong desire. He climbed down from his perch in the sycamore and went in search of Essie. He found her industriously peeling potatoes.

"Let's go to the river, Essie."

"I can't, Ben. I must work."

Resentment flared up in him.

"All right. If you don't want to come with me, you don't have to."

"But, Ben, I must do these potatoes."

"You don't want to come. That's it,"

"Ben, I will-will come if-"

"If, what?"

146

"Mamma can spare me."

"O, I guess it makes no difference what I want. Just so everybody else is satisfied."

"Wait. I will come."

"No, you won't. And I will never ask you again, either."

She caught her breath; dropped her voice very low.

"Forgive me, Ben. I——"

"O, go on with the potatoes. Mamma may not like it," and with that he stalked away.

Her eye followed him until he was out of sight. She bit her lip. She jabbed viciously with the knife. A tear fell in her lap.

The time went by. There was something dreamlike about the days that gave to them a foreign delightful atmosphere. They did not go quickly; neither did they drag. Like a little bark on a sea of glass, they glided gently along, each in itself freighted with sufficient joy.

There was the early morning, with the dew plashing from the leaves and the white fog like a mantle of eiderdown; there was breakfast, eaten while the fire was cheerful and the air heavy with the perfume of the morning. Then the sun came up, and its rays drove the fog before them like thistledown before a soft south wind.

The shade was grateful during the heat of the day; or if one preferred, there was the river as refreshing. Finally evening came, and after the last cast for the Big One, the fire was replenished and all sat round the campfire.

It was on such an evening as this. All were gathered under the waterbirch. The moon swung up into the sky, and flung over the glassy waters a pale silver path.

"There! The Valley of the Moon," Anne Rhodes pointed joyfully.

There was a long silence.

From down the river came the faint splash of a paddle.

"Maybe visitors are coming," cried Little Anne, clapping her hands.

The sound of the paddle was heard again. Voices carried low across the distance. Then there was a song, high, plaintive, longdrawn out and indescribably lonely.

O bury me not on the lone prairie! These words came low and mournfully From the pale lips of a youth that lay On his dying couch at the close of day. Silence in the group by the fire, the while the swish of the paddle became perceptibly plainer. Then came the notes of a banjo, tinkling and contagious, strangely belying the desolation of the song.

"It's Charlie Snowden; and he has his banjo!" and this time Little Anne jumped up and ran about in her delight.

To their great disappointment, the boat was paddled to the shore a little way below them.

"Maybe they are not coming here," and Peter Rhodes was clearly disappointed.

But they had not waited long until two men walked down from the road above the bar, and entered the circle by the fire. The one was Charlie Snowden, tall, ungainly and yet graceful; while to Ben's supreme disgust his companion was none other than Grouchie McRand.

Right heartily were the two welcomed.

"Come right down, boys. Well, well! Glad to have you come up. But you might as well have paddled up to the bar?" his tone held the slightest interrogation.

Charlie looked quickly at Grouchie McRand, but the latter was stolidly regarding his left hand.

"O, thought we'd jest tie 'er up down there," he said.

A circle was formed about the fire, all seated on comforters and pillows spread on the ground. Charlie Snowden, as the music maker, was given the position of honor near the fire and as the center of all eyes; and a look at his long flushed face showed that the position was to his liking.

With vast care he strummed the strings of his instrument until the response suited him.

"You've got a banjo, all right," was suggested.

"You bet I have," fondling the instrument lovingly. "Twenty-five brackets on 'er."

"Anything special, Parson?" after another interval. "Anything you want, Charlie."

He crossed his legs, rested his elbow on his right knee and struck up "Nellie Gray." Clear to the end he played it, his foot keeping time, the while his mouth worked in some sort of sympathetic accompaniment.

Charlie Snowden was not a great musician, but the melody he drew from his banjo stirred something wild and primitive within, giving to each man the far race-call to elude the years and return again to the old totem festivals of the childhood of the race.

When "Nellie Gray" was finished, he swung without preamble into "The Sourwood Mountains!" and his nimble fingers flew over the strings. The thing got hold of him. More than once he swung the banjo over his head, picking with the fingers of his left hand while it waved in the air. Once he started to sing accompaniment; carried the first line and then started clucking the notes:

"Oh! Chickens a-crowing in the Sourwood Mountains!
Ho delum dum dum a-doodle um-a-day!
Chickens a-crowing in the Sourwood Mountains,
Ho delum dum dum a-doodle um-a-day!"

For a time Grouchie McRand remained silent and motionless. It was as if he were giving his compeer a just opportunity to show his skill in entertaining. Then he fidgeted a little.

He had won fame in two directions. He was a wonderful clog dancer, and he possessed great skill with the bones. Fired partly by the contagion of Charlie's music, somewhat also by a pair of pool-blue eyes that were occasionally turned upon him, but mainly by the passion of the connoisseur for his art, he decided that the occasion was auspicious to show his skill.

Singing Mountains

150

He stood up, the hard earth for a sounding-board. From his pocket he produced two thinly whittled strips—the bones. Adjusting them between his fingers, he threw himself into the dance, the bones rattling a hoarse accompaniment to the banjo.

He abandoned himself utterly. His body became loose, boneless, yet charged with a tiger grace and suppleness. Up and down, up and down, his feet flew in an artless but perfect accompaniment. His left arm dangled loosely at his side, his right kept time with the bones, occasionally with the little fillip that gave the difficult back snap.

For some time Ben observed this spectacle, and with gathering gloom. It did not require his quick jealousy to understand that Grouchie was making a hit. Grouchie was undoubtedly making a hit. Essie Evans declared as much in the innocent open-eyed admiration she looked at him.

In time Ben could endure no more. Bitterness and humiliation were his portion. He withdrew quietly from the circle and went apart alone, to bewail the hard fate that had made him a minister's son, to whom clog dancing was a forbidden art. Devoutly he wished that he could dance, and with a skill far exceeding Grouchie's.

"I don't see what harm there is in it, anyhow," he blinked. "It never seems to hurt anybody."

Suddenly Grouchie stopped and Charlie laid his banjo carefully aside. He got up, straightening himself with great deliberation.

"There's more to this show," he pronounced mysteriously. "You just watch me."

He went up to the road and whistled. A moment he waited. Then a blue apparition approached him; came

within sight of the fire, and hung for a moment like a silken bird, poised in mid-air.

Then on small feet that scarce touched the ground, so eager was their flight, the apparition made straight for Anne Rhodes.

She arose from her seat by the fire, clutched her hands to her heart and strained her eyes through the shadows. Then with a movement half convulsive, half eager recognition, she flung wide her arms and let the blue vision to her heart, the while her face was transfigured by the light of having again one loved long since and lost awhile.

"O, Margaret! My little Margaret," she sobbed, and turned back the head on her bosom and kissed the young fresh lips.

Peter Rhodes blew his nose. He walked round and round excitedly, clasping and unclasping his hands.

"Well, well, if it isn't Margaret," he said at last.

"And how are you, child? And where is the hubby?

Where is Brooks?"

Margaret's eyes shaded for the briefest instant. Clearly one thing marred her perfect joy.

"He couldn't come," she said with lowering voice. "But he sent me," she brightened.

"And to think you have been out there all this time!"
"She told me to fix it," Charlie Snowden began importantly. "A surprise she wanted. And didn't I fix it, though?"

Anne Rhodes' face settled into an expression of perfect contentment. Margaret Hollingshead, her own Margaret, had come to visit them. They sat down, Margaret very near, her fingers wound about her mother's hand.

"Charlie," Peter Rhodes said, "suppose you play,

'Come, thou Fount of every Blessing,' while we sing it."

Have you ever heard this song sung by people who seemed to understand its meaning, sung out in the open and to the "chording" of a banjo? If you have, then you shall remember it forever.

Come, thou Fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing thy grace; Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise.

Anne Rhodes led, her voice rich with a vast tenderness, while her husband followed in his jerky uncertain voice that was ever liable to get off the tune. And the banjo, strangely adaptive to this new turn of emotion, was low and vibrant and sweet.

The voices continued until far into the night. Then there was laughter, some jesting, the sound of a paddle, and silence.

On the following day the Big One cut another line.

"I tell you, boys, there is a pike in there that is an old timer," declared Peter Rhodes emphatically. "Did you notice how the water swirled when he struck? It takes a big one to do that. And it takes a fisherman to land that kind, too," he ended significantly.

That afternoon he and Ben went up to bait the trot line.

"Ben," he whispered confidentially, "I have a plan for catching that big fellow down there." He jerked his thumb toward the bar.

"What is it?" Ben asked with pop-eyed eagerness.

"Pull over there to the bank. I want to tell you something."

Ben obeyed. Peter Rhodes got out and examined the trot where it was fastened to the sapling. He then

squatted down on the bank, spearing a little stick with his knife and beginning to whittle.

"Ben, one time in a certain deep hole in the river, a great pike made his home. For years he had been lord of the waters round about. He was three feet seven from tip to tip, and let me tell you, when he slipped his blue-white body through the water, the little chubs leapt high. They kept out of his way.

"He was wise. Life had dealt harshly with him, and he had profited. He was not to be fooled. On bright days he never would strike for a fisherman: he could detect the line reaching from bait to surface. On cloudy days he was bothered a little, of course, especially if a slight breeze ruffled the water's surface. He had to take risks, to be sure. But he was wise, all right.

"Then one day some fishermen came to camp near the pool where he made his home. And they fooled him, at first. He swallowed one hook, and had to cut the line; another hook was left in the tough cartilage of his long mouth.

"But then he caught on and began to fool them. He would strip their hooks of minnows, biting so easily they could not feel him. And occasionally he jumped up near them—just to tantalize them, I guess.

"But one morning they did not try for him. All that day he spent in search of food, visiting the mouths of numerous rivulets and nosing close up in search of tempting morsels. But he had poor success.

"He found plenty of sunfish. But for them he had no great relish——"

"Sure, I know," Ben interrupted. "Fins too sharp."

"Yes, their fins were too sharp. When it got hot in the middle of the day, he swam to the bottom of the deep hole and hung there, fanning the water idly. But he got desperately hungry."

Here he ceased speaking. He had fashioned a small wooden wedge out of the little stick he had been whittling, and now stopped to drive it into the ground, striking it with the back of his knife with minute care. When he had driven it in, he smoothed the earth about it with his hand.

"Well," he resumed, "as evening came on he thought to bestir himself. Over to the bank he slipped and in a secluded backwater near the bar he settled himself under a big leaf of one of the pickerel weeds that grow there. Long and slim and alert, he settled down, his pectoral and pelvic fins daintily fanning the water, his cold eyes active, his body ready. A fat caterpillar dropped from a leaf. With a swift dart, he gobbled it up.

"Then a splashing was heard out on the river. An intermittent swishing apprised him that the strange object that swam on the surface of the water and dropped food in all directions, was back again.

"'Now, men, for the fun,' was the sound that reached him, but of course he did not understand.

"He heard many a spat! upon the water, as of luscious morsels falling in. But he bided his time. The spats! became nearer. One came near the leaf of the pickerel weed under which he lay and he darted for it. But it was jerked quickly away.

"Another spat! which made a slight riffle on the water. But as he darted in the direction, he detected a white slim line reaching from the writhing gallinipper to the surface. Instantly he stopped, and was on his guard. Not again would he rush at anything that fell upon the water, he resolved. And that resolve he kept.

"But in the boat was a wise fisherman. Lifting the lid from a perforated can, he took therefrom a small frog, striped with green and gold. Laying it on his hand, he slapped it until it was stunned, and put it on his hook. He next paddled over and laid the frog on a big pickerel weed leaf, and paddled back to deep water, letting out his line as he did so.

"The big pike had darted away at the approach of the boat, but when it returned to deep water he again took up his watch under the pads. A yard distant from him, on the top of a leaf, lay the unconscious frog, and hooked in him, the fish hook. . . .

"Silence. Nothing moved. The pike was glad the strange object that swam on top of the water had gone. He could forage with less fright.

"The leaf a yard distant quivered slightly. The frog was coming to and beginning to stir a little. . . .

"The pike lifted curiously, nose pointed toward the leaf. A frog, striped with green and gold, kicked on it feebly, then slid into the water. . . .

"The big pike waited no longer, but struck with the speed of light. Long mouth open, he rushed; his jaws closed, the frog slid down his hungry throat. . . .

"The big bite presaged a night of contentment. Indolently he turned and made for his rendezvous in the deep hole. Then—a sharp jerk brought him up with a jar. There was a stinging sensation in his throat. . . . He understood!

"He started toward the pull, hoping to get against something and break the line. But though he swam and swam he could not seem to go just where he wanted to.

"He got tired, desperately tired. And finally—why had he not thought of it before?—he shut his needle teeth

down on the line. But it resisted him. It was hard and unyielding.

"He became too utterly exhausted to resist, but followed the steady pull toward some unknown objective. There was a quick lift; he felt the water slip from him; he was in the bottom of the boat!"

With the wedge he had driven into the ground as a starting point, Peter Rhodes had drawn a wonderful network of circles as he talked. Now he drew his knife through the whole, cutting it neatly in two. He glanced at Ben.

"Where did it happen?" Ben asked.

"I am not saying."

"Did it happen?"

"It might, if it didn't."

"I wish it would!"

What followed that evening seemed to Ben almost inevitable. They were down trying for the Big One. He swirled the water here and there, a powerful savage old monster.

Ben had no trouble whatever in visualizing him—three feet seven from tip to tip, with a large iron hook in the cartilage of his mouth, fanning the water and watching.

"Now peel your eyes, Ben," Peter Rhodes chuckled.

He took from a box a frog striped with green and gold. By slapping it on his palm, he stunned it; placed it on the leaf of a pickerel weed and paddled back to deep water, letting out his line.

Soon they saw the frog coming to. It moved aimlessly, slid into the water. And there was a mighty swirl near the leaf.

"You see, Ben," Peter Rhodes said later, when the Big

One was actually safe in the boat, "it did happen, didn't it?"

"You-you-"

"It never hurts to plan, Ben."

And then—the week was up.

Henry acted as if it had been time well spent. Whenever Jennie's name was mentioned, it was with him as if he possessed some wonderful secret which would be made known in due time. She herself was filled with an unfathomable joy; and while expressing regret at the breaking of camp, nevertheless seemed satisfied that no breaking of camp nor heights nor depths could rob her of a certain beautiful thing.

Only Ben seemed disconsolate. His resolve not to speak to Essie again had given him a grim satisfaction, the while he could snub her every hour and still be assured of seeing her again at will.

Not that he had any intention whatever of keeping his resolve. Sooner or later he would make up, he knew very well. But it was very nice to pass her without speaking; to be reasonably sure she went off somewhere and cried about it—as long as there was the certainty he could hunt her up and make up with her in case there should be need of it.

But to break camp in this strained relation would mean any one of a number of things. He might not see her again for weeks; and in that time almost anything might happen. Grouchie McRand, for example. . . .

He tried to seek her out and make up, but she avoided him. A day or so back when he was not so particular, he could find her at will; now that the situation was critical, he could not get a word with her at all.

On some errand she went up the rivulet; and he, watch-

ing from afar, saw her. He lost no time. Nor was he arrogant now. He was humble, very humble.

"I—I didn't mean it, Essie," he stammered when he had overtaken her.

"I am glad, Ben." But he thought she spoke very indifferently.

"D-do you care for me, Essie?" he asked.

"Do you want me to?" she returned, regarding him coldly.

For answer, grown desperate at her lack of warmth, he went closer to her and put his arm about her waist. She made no effort to elude him now.

"I think an awful lot of you, Essie."

She was very still.

"Are you sure, Ben?"

"Honest."

That was all, but as he said it a great exultation possessed him. He got her hand in his; looked her squarely in the eye and drew her closer.

But she looked quickly down. For the first time he noticed her wild agitation. She was trembling. Something very tender stirred within him.

"And I always will, honey," he whispered.

Chapter 9

THE ADVENT OF EDITH

OF late years there was very apt to be a weariness in the eyes of Anne Rhodes. Her spirit was the same as ever: the sanguine and the out-reaching, the spirit that made home the most wonderful place in the world.

But there was this weariness. It was the strain of the years, no doubt, for the activities that filled her days were numerous and exhausting. But that was not all.

Margaret, her first-born girl, had married and gone away. And try as she might, Anne Rhodes could never feel the same after that. It angered her that she could not be the same. Margaret married happily, so happily that tears came in her mother's eyes when she thought of her girl and her joys. And also, it was not as if she were the only child. Two sons and another daughter were left to her.

But really that did not make much difference. The first, the older girl, had won into her mother's heart as no other person ever could. Consequently there were times now in the kitchen when Anne Rhodes stopped and sighed; times in the evenings when Peter Rhodes was away at his appointments that her shoulders drooped as she looked into the fire.

But Margaret was back for a visit! After the party broke up in the Valley of the Moon, Margaret came home to spend a time with her mother!

Singing Mountains

160

Someway it did Anne Rhodes good just to sit down and look at her. She was the same Margaret, yet she had changed. She was plumper, pinker, and to her mother's eye far more beautiful.

It was, her mother thought, as if a house rose should be taken out doors where the winds might caress it and the sun's rays kiss it to fresh loveliness.

And then Margaret was so irrepressibly happy! The merry chirp of a sparrow was not equal to the saucy jubilation with which she arose of a morning and frolicked through the livelong day.

"You see, mother," she confided, "I can stay here with you and have all the fun I want, and yet know that Poppet is over there waiting for me."

Oh no, Poppet was not her husband's real name, any more than Tommy was Peter Rhodes'. But Margaret was like her mother in more ways than one; and so even as the older woman had coined a little pet name for her man, Margaret called hers Poppet.

Why Poppet, no one perhaps will ever know. Perhaps it came to her in one of those gay rollicking moods, and really meant that she considered him the most wonderful man in the world.

"Then, too," she said to her mother, this time with a lurking smile in her eyes, "I hope it is hurting him terribly to have me away."

Doubtless it was, but his loss was Anne Rhodes' gain. The tired droop vanished from her lips, and she never stopped to sigh. Too, in addition to her affection, down in her soul she was vastly proud of this young woman.

For a day or two Ben took a passing interest in his sister, but he was too taken up with his own affairs to be lastingly impressed. An incident occurred a few days

after the breaking of camp that served to impress him far more than did Margaret.

He saw Essie at the store and she gave him a piece of news. Her aunt, it seemed, was visiting them and with her was her little daughter, Edith.

"And I am going to have a party for Edith, Ben," Essie went on, making a fine effort to control her excitement. "It is to be Friday night. I want you to come."

Ben did not say much by way of reply. He hardly knew what to say. He wanted to go to the party. But he had a vague feeling that parties were more for women than for men; and consequently he did not want to seem too much interested.

When Essie had gone, he hunted up Grouchie McRand. Have I given the impression that Ben and Grouchie were sworn enemies? They were not. Their very fighting indicated the extent of their regard for each other.

For years Grouchie had been Ben's friend, and for the same length of time Ben had been Grouchie's. True they fought often, but as often they made up; their very differences seemed to bring them closer together.

Grouchie now put his arm over Ben's shoulder, and Ben put his around Grouchie. Thus locked together they walked up the hill toward a large and faithful chestnut tree.

"We have a good time, don't we, Ben?"

"Always!" Ben asserted fervently.

"We don't mean it when we fight."

"I guess not!"

"We always go in cahoots, too."

"We always do."

They unlocked on reaching the chestnut tree, for the nuts were not yet ripe, and it would be necessary to knock the green burs and crack them open. Also there ensued a period free from conversation, while each was trying to knock the burs down. But in the course of time each ceased from his exertion and sat down with a fair supply of white chestnuts.

"Going to the party Friday night?" Ben asked with exaggerated indifference.

"Teedle-ump! Not me. I don't go to parties."

"Did you know about it?" Ben queried, loyalty to his friend paling before a rising satisfaction.

"Sure. I was invited. But no woman's game for me."

This was in striking confirmation of Ben's fears that parties after all were for womenfolk. Therefore he now set himself against any slightest show of desire.

"Nor for me!"

But despite these vehement declarations Friday night found both Ben and Grouchie bound for the Evans home. They were not together. Vaguely Ben felt that in going there he should manifest a certain reserve toward Grouchie.

Ben was first to arrive, looking somewhat awkward and feeling much more so. And shortly after him Grouchie came in wearing his best clothes which at that seemed to wrinkle into every curve of his ungainly body.

"Thought you wasn't comin'," Grouchie grunted when he got to Ben.

"Thought you wasn't!" Ben countered.

Shortly thereafter the young lady of honor came in. Essie, looking very fresh and attractive, brought her. But as compared with Edith, Ben admitted at once that Essie looked pale and plain.

Edith was the opposite of her cousin. Inclining to plumpness, her complexion dark, with black hair and big

clear brown eyes, Edith appeared the very embodiment of the beautiful. And there was in her very carriage a suggestion of tempting coquetry.

It occurred to Ben shortly after his introduction to her that it would be well for him to forsake the attitude of bored endurance he had decided on as proper for the occasion, and unbend even to the extent of putting himself out a little in order to assure this angel from heaven a good time. He went over to her.

"I'll show you how to play any new games," he offered with unaccustomed boldness. And the radiant smile that she vouchsafed him in return for this mark of consideration made him feel that he had done very well.

From across the room Grouchie saw and heard and turned bitter. "As if that dub could show her anything!" he thought sourly. "He don't know anything himself. I'll go over and talk to her."

Edith greeted his approach with a welcoming smile; and he thereupon resolved that no harm should be allowed to fall upon Edith Ames while she was visiting in Barren Rocks.

"Where is your home?" he asked.

"I live in Corwin, Mr. McRand," she answered sweetly.

Now this, he thought, was something like. People had looked upon him as a kid altogether too long. It remained for this girl from Corwin to recognize his essential manhood.

"You been here long?"

"Just a few days."

He felt that something personal, something striking, was demanded of him at this period. He contracted his right arm, a stern expression overspreading his face.

"Just feel that muscle," he said tensely.

Singing Mountains

164

Timidly, as though almost afraid of this rugged giant, Edith laid her hand on his arm. "O, isn't that splendid!" she exclaimed.

Ben had been a supercilious spectator of this. To him Grouchie appeared very low and exceeding vulgar in bringing the fact of muscularity into the conversation at all. He regarded him in disgust. But Grouchie's triumph drove him to a display in kind.

"Huh!" he deprecated. "That's nothing to what mine is. If you want to feel a muscle just lay your hand on that." He jerked his right arm taut.

"Now isn't that bigger that his?" he demanded as she ran her fingers admiringly over it.

"O, I think you are both just splendid. Are you boys great friends?"

Grouchie looked at Ben, his glance cold and appraising. "Not so you could notice it," he said contemptuously.

Whether opportunely or not, something here called Ben to the other side of the room. Grouchie eyed the retreating figure coldly.

"Him!" he snorted with a jerk of thumb. "Say, Edith, he's no good."

As the party progressed a certain coldness was manifest in the relations of Ben and Grouchie. No longer did they get off in a corner by themselves; they began actually to avoid each other.

With the decline of their friendliness toward each other, came an increase in their admiration for Edith. Seeking her out, they played with her; they neglected others in order to sit with her.

When one was alone with her his tongue wagged volubly. But when the two were in the coveted presence together there was a strained and sullen silence.

When the party was over, Ben went home alone. His mood was one of rapture. He felt a strange tingling throughout his being that was altogether delightful. Walking alone in the darkness he erected a stage in his own mind, supplied characters from his fertile imagination and enacted a drama of three acts.

Аст I

Pretty Edith Ames walking along a lonely road, dressed just as she was at the party given by Essie. Suddenly a ruffian of a boy swaggers up to her.

"Right purty ribbon you got, little gal," he sneered, laying a dirty hand on it and jerking it off her hair. "Oh-o-o!" she cried, trying to pass him.

But he stood up in front of her, an ugly leer on his face. "Maybe I'll hug you, little 'un, before you go on."

She went white with horror and glanced wildly about her for a means of escape.

Act II

Just at this moment, Grouchie McRand chances along, sullen and insolent as usual. Edith turns to him.

"O, Grouchie," she cried. "Help me."

"What is it, Edith?" he asked.

"Make this boy let me go," she implored.

But the ruffian turned on Grouchie. "What you got to do with it?" he snarled, thrusting his face close. "Who said you'd meddle with me?"

Grouchie fell back, shaking with fear. "I—I won't hurt you," he stuttered.

"You sure won't, boy. But what I'll do to you'll be a plenty."

He got Grouchie by the hair and shook him until his teeth chattered. Then, "Say you've got enough," the ruffian snarled.

"S-stop hurting me! Enough, enough!"

"Then let mammie's little boy trot on down the road and mind his own business."

Terrified, Grouchie made to leave the awful presence. But Edith called after him, all the old terror in her voice.

"Are you leaving me, Grouchie?"

But he let on he did not hear her and ran off down the road.

"Don't you holler no more, little 'un," the ruffian growled, returning to his victim.

Act III

Enter Ben Rhodes, at sight of whom Edith calls out in great relief.

"O, Ben, don't let him hurt me!"

"What do I find here?" Ben demanded of the rowdy in a severe tone. And at the very expression of his face the ruffian fell back.

"Speak up!" Ben thundered. "What do I find here?"

"I wasn't doin' nothin'," the fellow whimpered.

"He was, too," Edith spoke up. "He was going to hurt me. Make him go away, Ben." As she spoke a new note of security crept into her voice.

Shaking with fury Ben lunged at the cowering figure, his fist taking him squarely on the jaw. He stood threateningly over him until he got to his feet. Then he pointed down the road.

"Go!" he commanded with fine restraint.

The fellow slunk away.

"O, Ben, how splendid!" Edith smiled at him, the color returning to her beautiful face. "How strong and wonderful you are!"

"Shucks," he answered. "That was nothing. I was afraid to hit him hard. Might have killed him."

The curtain fell at this point; and the subsequent action was rather vague. Ben simply thought of himself walking slowly down the road with Edith, himself the object of her gratitude and admiration.

It was a few evenings later that Molly Thomas, wife of Ephriam the great gigger, gave another party, both for Edith's honor and the pleasure of her own girl, Lila. Both Ben and Grouchie in their respective homes set about preparations for this event with serious enthusiasm.

Edith arrived altogether lovely in a white dress that gave her a more alluring, more inviting touch than ever. And her arrival was a signal for a renewal of the conflict for her favor between Ben and Grouchie.

But in a way almost uncanny she maintained her neutrality. She smiled at each with the same tempting adorable smile. When the game was dropping the hand-kerchief and Ben secured one of her hands and Grouchie the other, she divided her attentions impartially, leaning with subtle invitation first toward the one and then toward the other.

If Ben, feeling her warm little hand nestling in his, was certain there was more feeling in it than in the hand

Grouchie held, it was, after all, not her fault. While if Grouchie, giving the little hand he held ever so slight a squeeze, was sure she returned the pressure, and more certain still that she was not treating Ben with equal consideration, it was really his own lookout.

In time as the party progressed, the ancient and exciting game of hulgull was announced. As a usual thing this game was played with grains of parched corn. But to add a touch of excitement on this special occasion, little candy beans were to be used instead.

To begin with, each one present was given ten beans. And in the fear that Edith might not be familiar with the game, kind Mrs. Thomas explained it.

"Has each one got ten beans?" she asked. On being assured of this fact, she continued. "Then this is the way to play: From my ten beans I will put four, let us say, in my left hand and cover them with my right hand.

"Going up to Ben, for example, I shake the beans in my hand and say, 'Hulgull!' He answers, 'Handful!' Then I say, 'How many?'

"Now suppose he says, 'six!' when I have only four in my hand. I will show you my hand and say, 'Four. Give me two to make it six!' If he had said three, he would have had to give me one to make it four; but if he had guessed right, he would have got all I had. Do you understand?"

For answer a perfect bedlam broke loose. Hulgull needed no introduction to Barren Rocks; and the candy beans certainly gave an added zest. They were good to eat.

It so happened that Ben possessed an uncanny skill at the game. When he shook his hands in front of a contestant he did it with such cleverness and dexterity

that the individual was usually flustered and therefore guessed wildly.

Consequently the game had not proceeded far until his pockets began to bulge out with the beans he had won. He soon had such a safe margin that he felt justified in nibbling one occasionally.

Of course when one lost all the beans he had he was out of the game; and it behooved everyone to be careful. But Ben had serene confidence in his ability. He was fairly rolling in beans, so to speak, when Edith approached him.

She smiled bewitchingly upon him, her brown eyes dancing with delight. Holding out two pink hands she shook them under his nose.

"Hulgull!" she dimpled.

"Handful!" he answered promptly.

How many?"

"Nine."

"Only five," she cried excitedly. "Give me four to make it nine."

"Try again," he prompted recklessly, waiving his own

"Hulgull!" she accepted.

"Handful!"

"How many?"

Ten."

"Only one!" This time she fairly danced her delight. "Give me nine to make it ten."

"Let me see your hand."

He leaned over until his face was very close to hers. One bean reposed in her pink palm. A cunning look came into his eyes. He felt in his pockets and what he found there reassured him. For the moment he regretted even the few beans he had eaten.

"Try again."

For a long time they stood there, getting more intimate, more personal in their transactions. Only now it was Edith that nibbled an occasional bean.

But not for long did they escape a certain watchful eye. Grouchie came over moodily. He had lost all his beans and was consequently out of the game. He fixed a dull eye on the two and stood watching. Finally he could endure it no longer.

"Aw, what you foolin' with that kid game for?" There was infinite contempt in his voice. "I quit long ago. Let's play something else."

"We don't want to quit, do we Edie?" Ben asked.

There was the barest flicker of an eyelid as she replied. "Of course we don't. Who said we did?"

When at last she had won every one of his beans, she looked rather guilty. "O, what have I done?" she cried. "I don't want to take them all."

"I don't care."

"I tell you what!" Leaning very near him, "Suppose we get over here by ourselves and eat them," she laughed.

To this he made absolutely no objection. Reaching a secluded corner she held out her hand to him. On it were many beans, slightly sticky but very good. He got some; and together they ate them.

Once while they were sitting there Essie came over to them. "You got them almost all," she laughed accusingly.

"We have been at it a long time," Ben answered.

She looked at him for the briefest instant. The glance baffled him. But she did not tarry. Almost before she sat down she was up again and away, leaving him alone with his new and absorbing interest.

When the party was over, it was Edith and not Essie

whom he took home. As he walked along beside her he experienced a certain wild moment when he wished that Edith were staying many, many miles away. Even at that the walk home would not be long enough to satisfy him.

But the terror of the night soon got hold of Edith. The tinkling shoals which were music to him seemed to her the whisperings of confusion; the distant noises which simply said that darkness was awake stirred uneasy emotions in her.

"It is awful, Ben!" she shuddered.

"Don't be afraid," he comforted.

She drew close to him, linked her arm in his. But he extricated himself and put his arm about her.

"But I can't help it," she continued, shrinking nearer.

"Nothing will hurt you," he assured her.

He was sorry when they reached the house. She slipped from him and entered the door, leaving him possessed by the strange new exultation.

About half way home a figure loomed up by the roadside. Ben scrutinized it briefly. It was Grouchie, Grouchie coming loweringly toward him.

"Say," he asked, "do you want to fight?"

Ben laughed cheerfully. "Guess not. Had too much fun to-night to spoil it." There was malice in his voice.

"You're afraid to fight."

"Don't want to hurt you. She wouldn't look at you as it was. What would she do if I spoiled your face?"
"Aw, shut up before I mash you."

In the days that followed they passed each other without sign of recognition. The old intimacy was a thing of the past. Came a day when Grouchie passed Ben, and the latter looked straight at him.

Singing Mountains

"What are you looking at?" Grouchie demanded irritably.

"Nothing," Ben replied and went on.

172

The next party was given at the Manse.

So complete had been his triumph at the last function that Ben planned an even more complete victory for the coming event. There was to be no subtlety. He intended simply to monopolize Edith and do it thoroughly, before Grouchie had a chance.

He dressed as befitted the occasion. His face glowed a ruddy hue, and his hair was parted in the middle and roached after the manner he considered most becoming.

As a last final touch he slipped into his mother's room, took from its hiding-place a small bottle of cologne and anointed himself with the perfume. He even put some on his finger and brushed it lightly over his lips. It was somewhat after the fashion of a dandy that he presented himself at the party.

He sat in the room a lone figure waiting for the arrival of the guests. The faint perfume on his clothes cheered him: he thought with secret delight of Grouchie's discomfiture on his arrival.

His heart bounded when he heard Edith's voice without. But he heard Grouchie's in reply, and his heart sank. He actually stood up and gaped as she entered; and close behind her was Grouchie, smiling, confident and debonair. He had brought her to the party.

And Grouchie McRand had on long pants.

This latter fact deserves a paragraph by itself. It was sufficient to crush Ben beyond recovery. Grouchie with long pants; and here was he, Ben Rhodes, in short pants, the garb of a mere lad.

Whether it was because of his long pants, or whether it was due to the fact that in going after and bringing

Edith to the party he had so signally triumphed over Ben, matters little. The truth was that Grouchie seemed buoyed up by a confidence as sweeping as it was absolute.

From the outset he fairly dominated the party. If games were to be played, he gave directions; if questions were asked, he answered them. Ben was completely overshadowed.

"Now we will play Post Office," Grouchie announced grandly. "I will be Postmaster and carry the letters. You can write them now, any time."

This gave Ben what he considered as a fine opportunity. Why not write to Edith and ask to take her home? It was a desperate step, but he determined to take it.

Grouchie took the letter from him and read the address with a tolerant smile. When he delivered it to Edith, he said something to her in a low voice, that caused her to titter. Ben guessed what he had said, and silently swore that those softly spoken words should in due time be crammed down his throat.

Anxiously Ben awaited a reply. His eyes were fixed on Edith as she laboriously answered his request. He saw her hand it to Grouchie; and the latter when he read the address turned maliciously.

"Ben, Ben," he chanted glibly. "Ben, Ben, shot a goose and killed a hen."

There was much laughter.

"Ben, Ben. Where's Ben?" Grouchie continued. But Ben sprang up and snatched the letter from him.

"I'll get you," he hissed.

"Not with short pants, son," Grouchie answered.

Suddenly short pants seemed to Ben the one insurmountable handicap in the universe. To him there smarting with mortification his slim shanks seemed to be

Singing Mountains

the epitome of ugliness, making of him a veritable scarecrow. He slunk into a corner and sat down.

He unfolded the note. There was but one word on it and it was heavily underscored. It contained two letters. For him, the party ended there.

He went to bed that night in a dark mood. Two things only were clear to him: he must change his name and he must have a pair of long pants. But even with long pants it would be some time before another party: something ought to be done at once.

The next day he made inventory. His financial resources were limited: after draining them all he could get together but seven cents. And well he knew that between seven cents and a pair of long pants there was a great gulf fixed.

But pocketing his fortune he went up to the store. Arrived there he took his time. After a careful inspection of many things a blue-bordered handkerchief caught his eye.

"How much is that?" he asked.

"Selling 'em cheap now. Four cents."

"I'll take it."

174

With the three cents that remained to him he purchased some pink gum drops. They were two for one cent, so he got six, really quite a bag full. Armed with these purchases he marched confidently down the bottom.

Down near the Evans place he met Grouchie, but so absorbed was he in anticipating his coming triumph that he failed to take note of the self-satisfied air of his rival.

But as he approached the house a new terror filled him. Suppose Essie should come to the door in answer to his knock! What should he say? Of late he had been unable to understand her. Too, while he would not

allow his mind to dwell on the matter, he felt dimly that he was piling up with reference to her, material for a day of reckoning.

But he need have had no fears. Edith in light brown with a touch of something red on her hair, espied him through demure but sparkling eyes from an upstairs window. She smiled complacently.

Hastily she hid a brown paper poke well filled with salted peanuts—evidently but recently acquired. She got out a handkerchief and with a small, soft hand carefully removed some stray grains of salt from her red lips. Then she went below to meet her caller.

"How-do-you-do, Ben," she greeted him, again with that air of subtle invitation.

He heaved a sigh of relief. The spectre of Essle disappeared. Boldly he regarded Edith, his whole manner betokening high interest.

"Afternoon, Edith. Like candy?"

"O, Ben!"

He handed over the brown bag of gum drops. First she peeped in, then she deftly extracted one. She passed the poke over to him. "You take one."

"Huh-uh," he declined carelessly. "Don't want any."

He watched her eat the gum drop. He noted with approval that she took very dainty bites. She was used to such things and knew how to act. Now Essie, she might have eaten the candy with openly expressed relish: she did not have Edith's way about her!

He drew from his pocket a small package and handed it to her. "Look in that if you want to see something pretty," he said.

"O, Ben!" she giggled. "What is it?"

"Something for you."

"You give it to me?"

"Sure. I got it for you."

When he took his leave a little later it was with the conviction that he had made very favorable progress. The handicap of short pants did not seem so insurmountable after all.

As for Edith, she went upstairs nibbling a gum drop with relish. But the sight of a fresh bag of peanuts threw her into a quandary. She set the gum drops down by the peanuts and for the first time realized that her position was becoming ticklish.

She realized that these generous young knights would doubtless demand in consideration of the favors showered upon her some unmistakable signs of appreciation.

With guileless duplicity she stood ready to award each in his turn. How she was to do this troubled her little. The difficulty was not in the how but in the when. They were often with her together, or wanting to be. How could she favor the one without offending the other?

Gum drops were delicious beyond a doubt. But why reward them in a manner calculated to cut off the supply of peanuts? With characteristic charm she decided on a policy of allurement and evasion.

Encourage both; do it diplomatically, of course, but avoid any favoritism. Endorse the gum drop régime; but carefully encourage the peanuts.

Future consequences proved the wisdom of this policy—for a time. Almost every day Ben trudged down with his offering; and either preceding or following him Grouchie McRand pilgrimaged to his shrine to worship and offer gifts.

And when in time the object of all this consideration was just beginning to tire of gum drops and peanuts a new order was mysteriously instituted according to which she now received chewing gum and large sticks of peppermint candy.

She welcomed this change with hearty delight. Seldom was she seen without a stick of the peppermint held daintily between her fresh, young lips. But on the rare occasions when it was absent she chewed sweet gum with such relish that her jaws ached.

Nor did all this escape the eye of Essie. Since Edith was a guest in Essie's own home, her actions naturally came much under the latter's scrutiny.

Essie was tolerant. She wanted her friend to have a good time; and by nature she was not assertive. But the last feather was placed on the mule's back, so to speak, when Edith began to use her as second fiddle by giving her of the gifts when she herself had had enough.

Day by day a light crept into Essie's eyes that was not pleasant to see. It was a light that boded ill for the future peace of some one.

But the course of affairs was not running any too smoothly for Ben and Grouchie. They soon found out that the game they were playing was expensive business.

Ben asked of the storekeeper one day, "Will you give me credit for a few days on some things?"

"Credit? What do you want to git!"

This was the question Ben had feared. His heart pounded. "O, candy and things," he answered.

"Not a bit of it," the storekeeper snapped.

Grouchie's conversation with the same storekeeper was so similar that the one account will do for both. The matter began to look serious. If the two had come to some understanding a joint agreement might have been arrived at for restricting competition.

But there was no such understanding; and each one,

suspicious of the other, vowed that he would not be a cheapskate in an affair of the heart.

Ben was brooding over this question up on the stable roof. The roof was almost flat; it offered a secluded retreat; and he usually climbed up on it when he faced the necessity of prolonged reflection.

The field of enterprise in Barren Rocks was limited. In fact, at this particular time of the year he should have to make money either by gathering and selling chestnuts or by shelling and selling corn. There was no other recourse.

"You might get some money by hunting chestnuts, Ben," Little Anne said suddenly. She had climbed stealthily up to the roof without his knowledge.

Ben jumped, then growled. "Money?" he gaped. As usual when she put her finger on the sore spot of his trouble, his tone was fretful. "What do I want with money?"

"Ha!" And the author of this ejaculation was Henry. He stuck his head up above Little Anne's and grinned maliciously. "Ha! So Daniel needs money, does he?"

The reference to Daniel Boone was a mistake. It aroused memories in Ben; and in his present state he was in no mood to respect promises.

"It was all right to be Daniel Boone when I was gadding up the river with you to see Jennie, wasn't it?" he jeered.

At this, Little Anne's eyes popped. Of a sudden she became Ben's old and trusted ally. "Tell me about it," she wheedled.

"Of course I'll tell you!" Ben swept on angrily. "We went on and on up the river, and Hen kep' saying we were on a hunting trip. We got to Wade Davis's and Hen slipped down——"

Henry had stood for a moment as if hypnotized by the grisly potentialities of the situation. He knew Little Anne's fondness for promiscuous conversation. For a moment he really had not thought Ben would tell. But when he began recital of the actual facts Henry sprang wildly toward him.

Ben broke off. "Then take her and go away and let me alone," he cried. "If you don't, I'll tell it all."

This threat moved Henry. In a very short time Ben had his retreat to himself again and for the second time was facing the fact that it was either chestnuts or corn.

He finally decided that it should be corn. The crib was a lean-to of the stable and there he got the corn. It was on the cob, but he shelled it and carried it to the store.

He did this secretly, because Peter Rhodes would have taken an unalterable stand against such a course. But biding his time until his father was away at his appointments Ben was able to carry through his project without being observed.

At the rate of thirty-five cents a bushel he sold ninetyseven cents' worth. This amount of money made him reckless. He jingled it in his pocket, counted it again and again—and considered how he should spend it.

He planned a supreme coup. For his final decision was that he would get Edith a locket and chain! But there must be no mistake about it. He called on her so he might make absolutely certain.

"Too bad you don't have a locket, Edie," he began.

"A locket!" She must have understood something of the import of his words, for her lips parted in her eagerness to hear more.

"I mean a gold one with a long chain," he continued, determined to impress her still more.

"Wouldn't that be too cute for anything! But I guess I will never have ofe," she ended wistfully.

"Don't be too sure," he cautioned significantly.

It was not long after he had implanted this new hope in her breast that Grouchie McRand called. He likewise had wrestled with the financial problem, had triumphed, and was now contemplating a new departure. But it lacked the magnificence of his rival's.

"You've et about enough of that cheap stuff," he said to Edith scornfully, referring to the candy. "Bout time you was getting a big box of chocolates."

At any other time this suggestion would have set Edith wild. On many occasions she had discovered empty chocolate boxes in the parlor of her own home directly after the departure of her older sister's callers, and because of this chocolates had figured largely in her anticipations of the future.

But coming as it did right on the heels of Ben's veiled hint of a real locket and chain, it seemed rather pale. "Yes, Grouchie," she answered musingly. "But there are other things than candy."

"What other things?"

"O, nothing."

But his suspicions were aroused. All the way home he brooded over this perplexing turn of affairs. And his final conclusion, while it lacked in specific detail, was not far wrong.

Arriving home he counted his savings; on the following day he priced a small gold band ring at the store; and the next day he went to see Edith.

"A gold ring is the thing for looks!" he informed her with conviction.

Edith declared that if there ever was anything nicer it had escaped her attention altogether.

"One 'ud look fine on your finger!"

"Grouchie! On mine?"

As he was taking his departure he turned to her significantly. "You just wait till the picnic and see," he said.

These words were peculiarly like Ben's as he was leaving her later in the day. "Say, Edie," he said. "About that—you know! Just you wait till the day of the picnic and see."

In both cases reference was made to a picnic that was to be the final event of Edith's visit. The day after it she was to go back to Corwin.

It was not to be a community picnic; it was an affair of a dozen or so: lunch should be packed and taken up to the Valley of the Moon and eaten amidst great jollification.

But it was in this connection that Edith feared some terrible complications. For the first time she began to doubt the wisdom of her policy of encouragement and evasion. It seemed likely to fail her at the most critical juncture. She took Essie into her confidence.

"What shall I do, Essie!" she cried despairingly.

"Do about what?" Essie asked coldly.

"O don't get mad at me! But Ben has promised me a locket and chain and Grouchie is going to give me a ring. But one musn't know what the other is doing!"

Here it developed that Essie was to be no help at all. "You will have to get out of it the best you can," she said unfeelingly. "You got into the mess."

It does not help one when in a difficulty to reflect that she has only herself to blame. "But what shall I do?" Edith wailed.

"Take the one you like best."

"But I like them both best."

The day of the picnic dawned and found Edith still wavering. She wanted the locket; indeed at times she thought she had never wanted anything quite so much. But the ring, the dear little ring! And she wanted both Ben and Grouchie.

"I've kept them both so far," she told herself fiercely. "And I will just keep it up."

As she stepped out of the house slightly in advance of Essie, she found both Ben and Grouchie waiting for her. Each wore a very determined look.

"I'll carry that lunch box!" Grouchie volunteered. "No use for you to lug it around."

"Give me your coat," Ben requested. "Too warm for you to wear it." He draped it carefully over his arm.

Before long Ben drew from his pocket a strange looking package and held it so Edith alone could see it. "Let's walk on, Edie," he urged her. "No use to poke along like this."

But Grouchie kept pace with her. Soon he produced a small square box, contemplated it closely for a moment and smiled. "No need to hurry as I can see," he said aside to Edith. "Don't go so fast."

Edith could have cried. Never had she wanted anything so much as a peek inside that square box, or to open that queer looking package. She cast an imploring glance at Essie, but the latter's face hardened.

"It's nice, all going together this way," she said wickedly.

They reached the Valley in due time, and long before midday prepared and ate the lunch. It was while they were all helping to clear away the things that Grouchie's eyes were opened.

Edith was down by the fire throwing rubbish upon it, and Ben was near her. Again he drew forth the peculiar package and showed it to Edith.

Both were so preoccupied that they did not observe Grouchie's approach. But when he saw the package Ben held, he stopped.

"It is in there," Ben whispered.

"Thank you! Thank you!" she said, fairly beaming upon him as her fingers closed over the package.

"You won't forget?"

"Forget you? O, Ben!" Edith's clear, brown eyes were very expressive as she said this.

When Grouchie saw what had taken place, his face hardened. The usual surly lines of his face deepened. He turned on his heel and walked away.

Bitterness filled him, bitterness at Edith's duplicity. "Teedle-ump!" he snorted. "I might o' known it."

"Will you help me a minute, Grouchie?" It was Essie speaking to him. She was trying to fold a cloth in the habitual creases and needed someone at the other end.

"Sure," he answered.

Brought thus near to her her old appeal got hold of him again. After all, there was no girl quite like Essie! He looked shamefacedly at her.

"I want you to forgive me, Essie," he said suddenly. "I never meant anything with her," with a jerk of his head toward Edith. "She is no good."

He made a double appeal to her. In the first place his words were as ointment poured on a smarting wound, and in the second it was no little thing to have Grouchie McRand, usually so stubbornly independent, humble himself before her in this manner.

Singing Mountains

"I never thought you did, Grouchie," she answered softly.

"Course I didn't. Will you let me take you home, Essie?"

"You can if you want to."

"I want to, all right."

184

Ben's triumph on the way home lacked one element: he was far from certain that Grouchie McRand envied him. For Grouchie and Essie were far ahead, and their laughter as it floated back to Ben sounded like the laughter of contentment.

Impatiently Ben waited two days. Then he went down the bottom to further his suit. But the thing happened which he long had feared. Essie met him at the door.

"Howdy, Essie," he said shamefacedly. "Is Edith in?"

"Edith!" Here was surprise. "Edith has gone home."

"Home?" Ben repeated stupidly.

"Back to Corwin."

"But I came down——" he began flounderingly, then stopped.

"Yes?" Her lip curled slightly.

"I came---"

"And I guess you can go back again," Essie snapped, shutting the door in his face.

Chapter 10

THE GREAT "OUTSIDE"

CAME a beautiful Sunday when the old hills revealed their essential vanity and worldliness by dressing up in gorgeous splendor. Talk about the paint on the face of a woman! The old hills round Barren Rocks outdid all that. It was coming winter, you see, and they wanted one last fling before the snow fell.

The maples looked a little sad at thought of so soon parting with their leaves: maples are rather tenderhearted anyhow. But the white oaks, knowing they should keep their leaves all winter, were very sprightly.

Sometimes a traveler, coming from those mountainous regions, marvels that among the dwellers there he should fins such rich appreciation of the beautiful, such quick response to the artistic. But he need not marvel.

If he had gone out of doors on this autumn Sunday at Barren Rocks; if he had gone up on Crow point and thrown his vision east and south he would have understood. The panorama was one of witchery: big mountains with straight upstanding pines, and others with gorgeous dress of parade; a creek that was a ribbon and a river that ran through the Valley of the Moon; soft breezes and distant mystic noises; the fragrance of earth and of cones of pine!

And it was Sunday. Sunday for Ben was always a day set apart. It was an occasion for dressing up, for

restrained activity, a day when he never thought of gun or fishing pole. It was a day of crowded church and quiet wanderings.

This day he was going to meeting. For this was Peter Rhodes' Sunday to preach at home and not at an out appointment. Consequently Ben dressed with great care, albeit his soul was heavy.

He got to the meeting house early. Most everybody did. The men and boys he found sitting about outside, whittling and chewing tobacco and talking. And for a time he mingled first with one group and then with another.

But Peter Rhodes finally shut his knife with a snap, got off a stump, and dusting his trousers with his hands, informed the men and boys that it was time to go inside and begin the service.

They found the womenfolk inside, dressed in their best and talking in neighborly fashion. But when Peter Rhodes walked toward the pulpit they stopped talking, turned to face the front and folded their hands in their laps.

There was no organ in the meeting house. There was but one song book—the one Peter Rhodes used. The interior of the building was of the plainest kind: bare floor, walls ceiled with pine but unpainted, seats made of straight pine trees hewn with broadaxe. But withal it was a sacred place.

Peter Rhodes opened the Bible, though it was really unnecessary for him to do so: he knew it almost by heart. He was not, as a man of an earlier age was wont to style himself, homo unius libri, but he did know this one book well.

Then he leafed through the song book until he found

a selection that suited him, when he announced it and read the first lines:

How tedious and tasteless the hours When Jesus no longer I see! Sweet prospects, sweet birds and sweet flowers Have all lost their sweetness to me.

The congregation arose and sang what he had read, Anne Rhodes leading while Margaret beside her sang like a lark. After singing the lines he had read they waited patiently for him to read the rest of the stanza, then took it up where they had left off and finished it. The hymn completed, they sat down again.

Up to this time Ben had been an interested observer and faithful worshiper. But at this point he made an observation that drove all worshipful tendencies out of his consciousness.

Essie had entered and was sitting with her mother on a bench to Ben's right. With a graceful little movement Essie put her hand up on the back of the bench in front of her, and Ben saw on her slim finger a small gold ring.

As far as actual sense perception was concerned he had no evidence that Grouchie McRand had given her this ring. But in his soul he had no doubt about it. And in dull pain he surmised another thing: Grouchie had got this ring for Edith, but had discovered her hypocrisy in time!

He glanced furtively about him as the service progressed, trying to locate Grouchie. In time he saw him over near the stove slouching low in his seat in his usual indolent manner, but with a smug smile on his face.

At the close of the meeting the congregation began

leisurely to disperse. But Ben wanted to get a word with Essie. Even more: since her way home led almost to the New Manse, he hoped that he might walk with her that far. Not openly, of course. But he might go along now before, now lagging behind, but being in her presence all the time.

But to his great disgust Brother Brian invited Peter Rhodes and his family over to dinner, and consequently Ben's path should lie in another direction.

Just as he, in the company of Henry and Little Anne, was preparing to go up the hill, he glanced round and saw Elizabeth Evans and Essie starting away; and lurking near with obvious purpose was Grouchie McRand.

Henry saw and understood. "Ha!" he began, the acrimony in his voice due to the fact that for some unaccountable reason Jennie had not come to meeting, "you are done for there, my son."

"Huh! I gave her up for Edith."

"And Edith went off and left him," Little Anne cut in, furious that Essie should for a moment have been forgotten.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in Corwin," Henry sagely observed.

But Anne Rhodes, with Margaret by her side, came up here, and the party went up the hill toward Brother Brian's.

It was the following day that Margaret went back to Sistersville. Ben saddled Bird and old Bill, got on Bill and led Bird down to the house. Peter Rhodes helped Margaret up into the side-saddle.

She was looking very sober now, keeping her eyes down and not looking up at all. Only once as the horses went single file down toward the bars, did she look back. Ben saw that she was crying.

Anne Rhodes stood in the doorway. She did not wave when Margaret looked back: her eyes saw not. Her figure drooped; the old weariness came back into her eyes. It was almost as if her own soul were being drawn from her body. She turned at last, sat down in the hickory-bottomed rocker and folded her hands. Then she got up and went into the kitchen.

Shortly thereafter Henry peeped in at the front door, saw that the room was untenanted and went in. His air was self-centered, yet he trod softly as if not wanting to disturb the grief of anyone.

He went over to the desk, got down the large dictionary bound in black cloth over v hich Peter Rhodes was wont to pore so constantly, and sought a definition for the word ram.

He found the verdict of the dictionary somewhat confusing, for it conveyed the information: I, that the ram is a male sheep; and 2, that the ram is an instrument of warfare, used for battering purposes.

This twofold and contradictory information was for a time a source of confusion to him. But after he had his experience with Old Buck he could well believe that the writer of the dictionary had inside and accurate information on the subject.

Not of course that Henry did not know the meaning of the word ram. Sheep were not numerous about Barren Rocks, but they were not unknown. The hills were too rocky and steep for good pasture; but in places they broke away into small plateaus and valleys. And now and then a venturesome soul would take advantage of this fact and raise a few sheep, especially for the mutton.

In fact, Caleb Jones' farm included a valley-plateau where the grazing while not all that might be desired

was nevertheless fairly sufficient; and on this tract he usually pastured a few sheep.

Becoming enterprising, he bought a ram, christened it Old Buck, and turned it in the old orchard lot that adjoined the yard of his house.

Henry consequently knew perfectly well what a ram was. But he sought for a definition of the word for a purpose closely associated with his growing regard for Jennie.

At this period he called on her openly and frequently. He was, moreover, accorded a wide and pleasing liberty. Ever since the party in the Valley, he had acted as a man acts who has a wonderful secret in his breast; and from the frequency of his visits to the Jones home and his open welcome there, this secret evidently concerned Jennie Jones herself.

Be that as it may, one of his primal passions was to appear well in Jennie's eyes, and to this end he lost no opportunity of impressing her.

One of his means to this end he had plagiarized outright from his father. Words were a passion with Peter Rhodes. For the edification of his parishioners as well, seemingly, as for his own delight, he wove from the origin and development of words many a romance and mystery.

He loved to speak of their etymology, to trace their development through old and strange metamorphoses, and to draw therefrom deep and profound conclusions.

This sort of thing fascinated Henry. Rather scornful of some of the practices of his parent—considering that he was now too mature to find pleasure in them—he never failed to listen with still breath to the strange history of a word, stretching as it often did from an old cuneiform up to a classic present.

And himself being fascinated, he early learned to try the thing out on Jennie to impress her with his wisdom. As it was she considered him the fountain-head of knowledge: he had been her teacher. But even so, he felt a reputation must be maintained after it has been won.

To this end he frequently regaled her with his knowledge of words, often shamefully plagiaristic with his father's material, but occasionally gleaning actual information for himself.

It was for this purpose that he looked in the dictionary for the word ram, hoping in the life history of that humble and somewhat vulgar term to extract grist for the mill of his love.

But as has been said, the information he gleaned offered him no clue. He wanted material that might bridge an embarrassed silence or create a wide-eyed admiration, but he found it not.

However, this did not mean that he would have to postpone his visit to her. He liked to go prepared, but if he could not find wherewith to prepare himself desire still urged him on.

"You ought to be ashamed to go over there when mother is so broken up," Little Anne reproached him as he started off. She herself was reveling in the emotion of Margaret's departure.

But Henry went on. He felt that it would take something more than the departure of Margaret to spoil for him the joys the day held in store. True the pleasure of pointing out Old Buck and then nonchalantly explaining to the adoring Jennie the etymology and development of the word ram, would be denied him. But there were other delights than that when he was with Jennie.

192 Singing Mountains

Approaching the house, he saw the ram in the old orchard lot. The ram likewise saw him.

In some respects Old Buck was peculiar. No general definition would have suited him. A member of a class he was nevertheless striking enough in appearance and disposition to be in a class by himself.

He was well set up, though a little ungainly what with his crooked legs and small eyes that were ever filled with suspicious gleam. From his poll his rough horns curled downward in an uneven circle and brought up directly beneath his eyes. When he walked it was with a jerky impressive movement of the legs that betokened imperious disposition. His muzzle curled in a particularly ugly and offensive snarl.

When first turned into the old orchard lot Buck had been somewhat uncertain of his status. Truth to tell he was not a little cowed by events.

But as day after day he wandered about with no restraint save his own will the conviction settled upon him that he was monarch of all he surveyed. Accordingly his head tilted at a more haughty angle which gave a cocky slant to his horns.

He came to be easily annoyed, especially by the intrusion of strangers. To his mind the lot was sacred to his own feet, and when anyone approached the belligerent gleam in his eye was a clear warning to that one to get out.

Henry saw him but passed by without loitering. There was no love lost between him and the ram.

Jennie was waiting for Henry and tripped to meet him on the light feet of joy. "I thought you never were coming," she greeted with a bewitching pout of rosy lips.

She made no secret of her pleasure in him, for she was

filled with the same important secret that so absorbed Henry. He made to slip his arm about her, but she wriggled free and skipped away.

"We are going for a walk," she informed him.

"Where?" he demanded with the masculine desire to have all details settled in advance.

"We are going—away off," she said mysteriously.

"There is a new place I have found, and we are to go and see it."

"I hope it is a pretty good distance." He had no objection to a long, secluded walk.

"It is," she answered, blushing, because she did not want him to know she had thought of distance in selecting the place. "So we must start at once."

To his dismay her step, once they had started, led them toward the old orchard lot. He suddenly felt that a short distance through the lot might be very long indeed.

His furtive eye as they approached apprised him that the occupant of the lot was walking up and down with short, jerky arrogant stride.

In a discreet manner he endeavored to dissuade Jennie from walking through the lot. He told her that he much preferred to walk in some other direction.

But she had settled on the itinerary of the afternoon walk and the goat pen was an integral part of the way. To her naïve mind, a straight line was the shortest distance between two places, even though Old Buck stood in the way.

"But there is no hurry to get there, honey." Henry's voice was deference itself. "Suppose we walk around a bit."

"O, but I want you to see this place I have picked out. It is simply lovely."

Let it be said in the interest of candor that Jennie herself had thought not at all of Old Buck when she planned this walk. She had not planned the trip as a test of her lover's valor. Like the owner of a particularly snub-nosed, ugly bulldog who cannot understand what others see in him to fear, it never occurred to Jennie to fear Old Buck, nor could she understand why anyone else should be afraid of him.

The ram has at times been credited with uncanny insight. Whether this be true of rams in general, it was a fact that Old Buck seemed to sense in Henry one who was fearful of his kind. He stopped and turned, the better to eye this stranger.

From the corner of his own eye Henry observed the movement, and inwardly he quaked. Then pulling his glance from the animal, he began to look about for a possible means of escape. Jennie's voice recalled him.

"Isn't it a perfect day!" she cried, dancing ahead like a wood sprite.

But Henry did not answer her. If he heard he gave no sign. But he did note that in the far distance was an apple tree with a low-hung limb, and he stored the knowledge away in his mind as a possible refuge in case of trouble.

"Listen at that bird!" Jennie cried again, throwing her head to one side. This movement brought into soft relief a very bewitching profile.

But Henry nade no answer this time. She turned to see why. And with the observation that he was paying no attention to her, her eyes hardened.

She walked on for a moment, then turned squarely upon him. "Didn't you think so?" she asked with simulated interest.

"Didn't I think so?" he repeated, at last brought

sharply to realize her presence. His jaw dropped; then he nodded his head with conviction. "You bet I thought so," he declared.

"Thought what?" she asked.

Truly the question disconcerted him.

"W-why, what you said, of course."

"What did I say?" she pressed without mercy.

"I don't know," he confessed.

"I thought not. I guess you never pay any attention to me any more."

"But see here, honey. I was thinking-".

"Not about me!"

"But——"

"Oh-o-o-o!" she screamed suddenly. And this time she did not simulate emotion; she was terrified. "Look at Old Buck!"

Henry whirled just in time to see the ram come loping toward him. But he waited to see no more. The marathon instinct seized him. Clutching Jennie by the arm, he fled, the apple tree as objective. They reached it and swung up, just as Buck whirled by like a catapult.

It really took Henry some little time to realize what had happened. As with primitive man, so with him: he acted and then began to think about it.

When critical intelligence did return to him he was sitting awkwardly on a gnarled limb, holding to the trunk to keep from falling off. Jennie evidently began to review the situation about the same time he did, for as he glanced at her she looked at him.

Some girls might have laughed. But she had a distinct image of herself as she hung there, one foot on the fork of the limb and the other far down in the crotch, and this image was not pleasant to contemplate.

Therefore the second glance she gave Henry was cold with interrogation. Some appreciation of this came to him; it occurred to him that the figure he was cutting was far from heroic.

But Old Buck was still below. He had run by quite a little in his initial rush, but had returned to the fray, his snout curled in an exaggerated snarl.

"Papa says you never should run from him," Jennie observed coldly.

"I don't know about that," Henry replied, looking down.

"I suppose we will spend the day here." Watch out for a woman when she begins to try irony.

"If he would only go away!"

"I believe I will go down and drive him off."

"Nothing of the kind," Henry declared hurriedly. "I'll go."

Just before he spoke he had seen something that gave him an idea. There was a pile of palings near the tree, heavy oak palings big at the butt and tapering to a sharp slender point.

The idea that struck him at sight of these palings was so simple and effective that he could have laughed aloud in relief. And to make possible the execution of the idea Old Buck relaxed his watchfulness somewhat and began to graze about idly.

Henry slipped down from the tree and over to the stack of palings. He secured one, placed the sharp end against his stomach and allowed the heavy blunt end to project outward wickedly. His intention was now obvious: he was going to hold the paling there and allow Old Buck to butt his brains out against the wicked, blunt end.

The idea was entirely typical of Henry. Always the

thing he essayed to do was the last thing another would have considered. When he set a fish pole it was to fix it so the slightest jerk would pull it down; half the time when he went to paddle across the river in the cut-off, he pushed the boat from the bank and left the paddle behind him; when he visited Jennie up the river it was not openly but as a thief in the night.

So now his plan of holding the paling at his stomach and allowing Old Buck to mangle himself on the end of it was peculiarly the product of his genius.

Jennie stood in her awkward position in the tree and watched his movements with widening eyes. Perhaps she might have called to him and deterred him—if she had not been smarting with mortification as it was.

When he was all ready he lowered his voice and flung out a hoarse challenge. "Ba-a-a-a!" he bleated.

Old Buck whirled at the sound and the sight that met his gaze infuriated him. He took a few steps backward, lowering his head as he did so, the while his eyes glowed with malevolent fire. A short, husky bleat of rage escaped him. Then head lowered and both front feet moving at once he catapulted forward.

This incident was to have future consequences, due to the fact that in returning from a long squirrel hunt Charlie Snowden had entered the old orchard lot just in time to witness Buck's first charge, and now sat not thirty yards away, hidden behind a fallen apple tree, an absorbed and gloating spectator.

Buck shot forward and directly he struck the paling, Henry found out he had made a mistake. The outcome differed widely from his intentions. Indeed, while his thoughts for the next few moments were not very coherent, he realized that the impact of the hard head on the paling had done him greater injury than the ram. He lifted his head from the ground and opened his eyes just in time to see Old Buck taking a few steps backward, head lowered and pointing directly at him.

Suddenly, clearly, it occurred to Henry that he should prefer to be alone. A longing for wide uninhabited spaces possessed him. It was at this period that he grasped the full significance of the dictionary's definition of a ram. Most certainly the writer of that volume was an individual of exact and specific information.

In a dim way Henry perceived that Buck was again moving in his direction, but he had not power to arise. Better to die than to live like this, he reflected feebly.

But just here salvation came to him in the person of Caleb Jones. He interposed between Henry and the charging ram; Old Buck changed his mind suddenly, stopped in mid-career and jerked sourly away.

Caleb Jones sat down on the ground and proceeded to relieve himself. His first movement was to bring his thighs up against his chest. Then he placed his head on his knees and remained in that position for some little time in silence.

His first audible outburst came after he had lifted his head and pawed space with his hands as though seeking plenty of fresh air.

"Ah-ha-a-a-a!" he shrieked. Tears were in his eyes. Charlie Snowden stepped from behind the apple tree and approached. "Quite a dog-goned good plan, that paling!" he said feelingly.

Caleb Jones exploded again. "Great," he roared. "Great plan."

Evidently there was a joke somewhere, for Caleb Jones was considered a discriminating man. But Henry failed to see it. He walked weakly over to where Jennie stood

under the tree. She had climbed down and stood somewhat uncertainly.

Henry smiled at her the smile of a sick man. "I guess I had better be going," he said.

"But you were going to stay for supper!" The coolness had left her voice altogether.

"I don't think I can," he said miserably.

"Dog-goned good plan," Charlie Snowden repeated, pressing what he considered a good advantage.

Jennie whirled on him with the fury of a catamount. "Yes, and it was a good plan to hide and spy, too," she shot at him.

Before the burning fury of her attitude he shrank back. The smile that came over his face was sickly. "Guess I better be goin'," he faltered.

"I shouldn't wonder," Jennie answered, chin in air.

Caleb Jones was taken aback when his daughter first turned to a catamount. His jaw dropped and he gaped at her. Then he realized there was more to the situation than he had imagined. He sobered up.

"Of course you will stay, Henry," he said. "Of course you will." He got to his feet and walked feebly away.

But while Henry remained for supper—the walk having been abandoned!—the consciousness of having appeared ridiculous was not to be blotted out. All reference to Old Buck was avoided; Jennie went beyond even her usual wiles to beguile him into forgetfulness. But at that Henry went home with a soul that writhed in mortification.

It was late that night when Ben got back from the station. He got off the horse and walked stiffly into the house, leaving Henry to put the animals in the stable.

Ben noticed that Henry was very silent. He was not at all frivolous as usual.

But it was not until the next day that Ben found out the cause. He went to the store and there found Charlie Snowden entertaining a respectably large audience with a graphic account of Henry's experience with Old Buck. He did not pause when Ben entered; if anything his loquacity increased.

"And be dog-goned if he didn't put the paling up agin his belly," he was saying. "The ole ram come head down and back a-rearin', and hit the paling ker-biff!

"Jennie was still in the tree watchin' him. When she saw what had happened she just laffed and laffed. 'Ha, ha!' she laffed. 'The awkward fool!'"

As he made this last statement he looked slantwise at Ben to see whether he was taking it all in properly. He was. And by a few leading questions he gained the whole story—as Charlie told it. Then he went home.

His first feeling was one of quick resentment at Charlie Snowden for telling the tale as he did. But he did not let on to Henry that he was taking his side. His tone when he spoke about it was a mixture of incredulity and scorn.

He came upon Henry unawares, sitting down under the old watercore apple tree.

"Hen, what did you mean by putting that paling against you," he began irritably. It was here that he displayed incredulity. "Couldn't you see that when the ram butted it he would butt you too?"

Henry jumped as if stung by an ox goad. "Where did you hear about that?" he demanded.

"Down at the store. Charlie Snowden is telling everybody about it. He watched you from behind an apple tree. He told how you put the paling against your belly and how Jennie laughed."

"Jennie laughed?"

"Sure. She laughed and called you an awkward fool."
Reflection might have convinced Henry that Jennie would not have said such a thing. But he was at that place where he wanted to get worked into a high anger

at some one, and this gave him a chance.

"Awkward fool!" he repeated bitterly. "It will be a cold day when she has a chance to call me that again!" Thus indeed are the issues of life often settled.

Of a sudden Ben began to take strange comfort in the situation. He did not know why, at first; but memory of a small, soft finger with a small gold ring soon apprised him. He and Henry were now both estranged from their girls; and his comfort in Henry's misery lay in the fact that he had company in his own trouble.

A trip that Henry was obliged to take some hours later led him past the store. As he was going by he heard from the deep recesses of the interior the bleat of a sheep.

"Baa-a-a," it issued forth; and it was characteristic of Charlie Snowden that he should make his voice tremble for all the world like an anxious ewe calling for her lambs.

Following the sound there was much discreet laughter. Henry hurried on, and returned home by another way. But though he dodged, yet did the hateful tale follow him. The affair seemed to tickle Barren Rocks hugely; there was no tendency to let the thing die down.

Some went even so far as to call Henry Buck.

There is after all no sting like ridicule. Henry would have stood up creditably under persecution for righteousness' sake; he might have braved anger in a good cause. But this low thing hounded him in a subtle nauseating manner that gave him no chance for retaliation or extenuation. All his vexation boiled up when he spoke about it to Ben.

"Ben, these Barren Rocks people are too vulgar. Their interests are low and common. I am getting tired of it all."

"But that was funny about the ram," Ben answered. He could not understand even yet. "Why did you put the paling against you? Didn't you see——"

"I wasn't thinking about that," Henry interrupted patiently. "It is the general littleness of the people that I don't like."

"Well, what about it?"

"I am going away."

Away? Away where?"

"I am going Outside." And by that he meant somewhere beyond the great hills that shut in Barren Rocks and made it a little world by itself.

"Outside?" Ben repeated worriedly. "Mercy, Henry!"

"I am going Outside. What is there here? Just hills and hill-billies. No railroads, no nothing. I am going out where men wear white collars every day."

. "But how will you live out there?" Ben was ever practical.

"Live! As if a man should have any trouble making a living. Besides," he added as an afterthought, "the Bible says to take no thought for the morrow."

This reference to the Bible stumped Ben, for he had long been given to understand that when the Bible speaks men should be silent. But he was not convinced.

"But suppose you didn't; where would you sleep?"

"Go on, go on," Henry cut in. "Say all you please. I am going Outside."

Ben saw that he meant it. "Can I go too?" he asked eagerly.

"If you want to."

"I'll go!"

Anne Rhodes was staggered when she heard of the plan.

"Why, son," she said to Henry, "you are to teach our school this year."

"No difference," he answered. "Besides, it don't begin until November, and then ends in April. A man needs work all the year round. I can't idle; I am going Outside."

It was late at night and Anne Rhodes was tearful. Peter Rhodes sat within the circle of the lamp's rays, partly undressed. The children had long since gone to bed.

"But, Tommy," she wailed, "they are both leaving me!"

He made an effort but was unable to straighten the lines that had crept into his face. "Maybe they won't go," he said weakly.

"But they will. The boat goes to-morrow."

He knew it. He got himself in hand and smiled more cheerfully. "Anne," he began slowly, "I have often watched a robin teaching her brood to fly. It worries her; she is afraid they never will make it. But it is only by trying that they learn."

Barren Rocks was far from the railroad. The country road that reached it was little more than a bridle path, now leading to a ford over a stream, now a narrow strip hugging the edge of a mountain and again so steep one might literally fall out of it.

Singing Mountains

204

It was out of the question to drive far. A buggy was a rare article because impracticable. Usually when people traveled a distance too far to walk they rode horseback.

As a usual thing, two or three times a year a long boat went down Elk river to Charleston to get a stock of goods for the store. And occasionally this boat took passengers Outside.

Very early in the morning while the fog still hung low and the dew was heavy the long boat swung out from the landing in front of the Old Manse and pointed its nose down toward the shoal.

Neither Ben nor Henry was aware of it, but up on the point overlooking the river Anne Rhodes stood beside a clump of laurel, straining her eyes to follow the boat out of sight.

Samuel Aked, gigger, sharpshooter and riverman, sat in the stern of the boat and steered it through the little channel that had been opened up through the shoal below Little Creek. Ephriam Thomas was in the bow and Tate Spraggs sat in the middle.

As the boat swung down past Buzzard Mountain, the Evans place came in sight, the house sitting over in the bottom. Ben looked at it as the boat drew near; but when passing directly by he looked sternly down the river, as became a man who was going Outside for good. He hoped Essie saw him. It would be the last time!

For two days the boat went down the river, at times paddled through the long eddies, at others running rapidly over the shoals; here running in toward the bank to avoid a dead tree that had hung in the middle of the river, there cutting a white path straight down while Samuel Aked trolled for perch; nosing into a little hollow where the water from the hills was good to drink, or

floating like a bit of sycamore bark past the little cabins set far up on the steep mountains.

But on the evening of the second day smoke might be seen hanging in the sky to the south, the sound of a locomotive whistle floated up the river; then quite suddenly the hills broke away, the long railroad bridge loomed up black ahead, and they were in Charleston.

"Whar air you two goin' to stay here?" Samuel Aked asked Henry as the quintet moved up the bank toward the city.

"We will stay at the Winton for a while," Henry replied carelessly, referring to one of the city's fine hotels. "Then we will move out somewhere else."

And Samuel Aked, reflecting that Henry must have been instructed of Peter Rhodes, said no more. Arrived at Capitol street, the party broke up, Ben and Henry going down toward the Winton.

But Henry had not been instructed by his father. Henry had desired no instruction. He wanted to run away from ridicule and make a name for himself: beyond that, he had made no calculations.

The only other idea he cherished concerning his future was bound up rather vaguely in the fact that Abraham Lincoln had been a lawyer before becoming president of the United States.

He had heard of the Winton House from a drummer; he did not know that a room for the two of them would cost an undreamed amount. He simply stepped up to the desk and demanded one, was assigned to the third floor, and went up to take possession.

Ben was very tired. He had slept little the night before, had been miserably cramped in the boat. The city, too, what little he had seen of it, had tired him beyond belief. The noise, the confusion, the great number of people had beaten upon his senses and bewildered him. The one thing that had impressed and awed him most was the number of wires on the telephone poles overhead: the telephone itself was a matter of wonder for him.

It was not long before he succumbed to the temptation of the inviting bed that stood in a corner of their room. But Henry did not. The city drew him. He went out.

And when he had gone, Ben slipped to the door and turned the key in the lock. He would open it for Henry when he should come back. But he was afraid of the city!

How long he slept he knew not. A troublesome dream came to him. In it he was barricaded in a house which was being stormed by an infuriated posse. They beat against the doors, threatened to set fire to the place, all the time demanding instant admittance.

Ben jerked his head from the pillow. There was a loud clatter on the door of his room; the high voice of Henry was raised without.

"Hey, Ben!" it said. "Wake up! Open the door. The old place is on fire."

Ben jumped clear of the bed at a single bound. He was quivering with terror. "Is it afire?" he chattered.

"Sure. Burning right to the ground. Hurry up."

Ben groped for the door. He heard a door open across the hall and a scared voice ask whether the hotel were actually on fire. Perhaps no one but Henry would have given the reply he did.

"Sure," he declared. "Sure. She is crackling all over."

Ben reached the door, and jerking it wide jumped into the hall. At the far end he saw a colored boy grinning from ear to ear, his eyes dilated with a strange unholy fascination. A door farther down was jerked open and a head muffled in a white nightcap thrust out. "O, is the hotel burning?" a feminine voice asked.

"Listen to it if you don't believe it," Henry answered. She assumed a listening attitude for an instant, then sprang back. "It is," she cried. "I hear it."

Henry pushed Ben back into their room, followed him within and closed the door. "Hurry up and get on your clothes," he said easily.

"But will I have time?"

"Sure. She's not afire," grinning sheepishly. "But we will have to get out. The place is too expensive."

Accidentally he had discovered the price asked for the room and had realized at once they could not afford it. He found a cheaper place on another street.

The hotel was by this time pretty thoroughly aroused. There was the sound of doors opening and closing hurriedly. As Ben and Henry slipped away, the former caught a glimpse of a wild-eyed clerk running from room to room with a reassuring message.

"But why did you say it was afire!" Ben wondered fretfully as he followed Henry along. The raw morning air was cutting him to the bone.

But Henry made no answer. There was none to make. He was simply like that; and one had as well ask a chicken why it should scratch.

The first few days in Charleston were taken up with seeing the sights. It was the first trip for them to a city larger than Sistersville, and consequently there were many things to arouse interest.

"Notice the buildings here, Ben," Henry was remarking one day. "The post office building and the capitol. I tell you, this is a wonderful place."

"And a walk to walk on so your feet won't get in the mud."

"Mud!" The word sprang from Henry's lips with infinite disdain. "I hope I never see it again."

"The people here dress up every day, too. Collars and everything like Sunday."

"It is the place for me, all right."

But before long it was evident even to the impractical Henry that work would have to be found. The amount of money they had had at the beginning was small, and it was dwindling daily. Work therefore was imperative. They set out to find it.

It was Henry's suggestion that they enter only imposing places and accept only that employment whose nature should be dignified and whose remuneration amply sufficient. He might be from the country, but he would accept no menial task.

With Ben doing little more than tag along behind, Henry entered the post office. It was about the most imposing building he had ever seen and he thought it best to try there first. A woman looked at him through a small opening.

"I should like to see the owner of this building," Henry stated modestly.

"You mean the postmaster?"

"He will do."

After some delay this personage made his appearance. He was rather tall with close-clipped hair gray at the temples. He swept Henry with an indifferent glance.

"Well?"

"I should like to secure work here."

"What do you do?"

"Practically anything."

"This is all civil service work here."

"That would suit me. Something civil and congenial."

"Suppose you come and see me Christmas," the man said shortly. Without another word he turned and walked into the inner office.

Henry gaped after him. The woman now took up her vigil at the opening and he addressed her. "I wish you would tell him I am ready to begin work now. He said to come back at Christmas."

"I don't think he wants to see you any more," she answered and began sorting a bundle of letters.

While Henry could not understand her words her manner was convincing: there was no work and less cordiality for him at the post office. He turned on his heel and walked out.

"We will go in here," he told Ben as they approached a large drygoods establishment.

"Experience?" the manager demanded crisply. The answer sent them on their way.

They went down by the Western Union; and Ben saw in the window a sign to the effect that a boy was wanted as messenger. He called Henry's attention to it.

"Too low-down. Never forget you are too good for some things."

But when the next day passed and the next and still Henry had not found his congenial employment, Ben slipped into the office and secured the position as messenger boy.

His earnings helped out considerably. He received four dollars a week, and occasionally was given a tip for quick service. But it was soon evident something further would have to be done. They were down to their last dollars; and both had by this time come to realize that living in Charleston was less simple than at Barren Rocks.

Henry gave up the idea of accepting only dignified work in favor of doing anything that would get him pay for his services. It was then he saw the sign in front of the drug store. A young man was wanted within to tend the soda fountain. And—all applicants must have had experience.

Henry stopped and stared at the sign for a moment, then took in the import of those final words and swallowed hard. He opened the door and walked defiantly in.

A heavy individual was standing in the center of the room, hands thrust deep in trouser pockets, champing an unlighted cigar. He was glaring balefully about him.

"I see you want someone to tend the fountain," Henry said as he approached.

"Experienced?"

"I am."

"Good. When can you begin?"

"Now."

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The man opened the door of a small closet and brought forth a white apron. "Salary five a week. Put this on and clear up them dishes," he directed tersely.

A number of small round tables stood in the back of the room, on some of which divers and sundry dishes were scattered. Gingerly Henry gathered them up, placed them on a large blue tray which his employer had thrust into his hand, and looked about inquiringly. The heavy individual was again standing in the center of the room, only now his eyes were following Henry's movements balefully.

"Shall I take them to the kitchen?" Henry asked. For he had never before had dealings with a soda fountain. In fact up to this period of his life he had never been permitted the sight of a soda fountain.

"Eh?" His employer's jaw dropped.

"What shall I do with the dishes?"

"The boys usually eat 'em," he snarled. "Now you get a move on and put 'em in the washer and turn the water on."

Just from hearing him speak one could sense that this man had had first hand experience of the problem of labor and capital.

His directions were incomprehensible to Henry. But with pounding heart he carried the tray behind the counter. Luckily for him there were a few dishes similar to those he carried lying in a zinc trough just beneath the fountain. Into this trough he piled his dishes.

A snub-nosed faucet pointed toward this trough, and Henry turned it on. As far as his instructions had gone this now completed his task. Leaving the water roaring he turned to survey his quarters.

The counter was of marble and on it were any number of large bottles with strange labels whose meaning he did not understand. There were also numerous spigots connected with the fountain of whose use he knew absolutely nothing.

But he reasoned that before he could secure a position in this strange city he needed experience. That had been made very clear to him. But where could he get it except he began? The maze of bottles and faucets and spigots confused him somewhat but he made no sign.

He turned and stepped in water. The trough was full and the water was now running out on the floor. He shut off the faucet, with a glance at his employer as he did so. But he seemed preoccupied.

Two girls tripped into the room, glanced appraisingly

at Henry, seemed satisfied with what they saw and going to the rear seated themselves at one of the tables.

Henry stood paralyzed with admiration. Worship was in his eyes. Never before had he beheld such a vision of entrancing loveliness as he now beheld in one of these girls.

Her companion addressed the lovely one as Ned, and while the name struck Henry as inappropriate, Ned herself surpassed for sheer tantalizing comeliness any person or thing he had ever seen.

Perhaps the reason for this lay in the fact that at Barren Rocks the art of artificial adornment was practically unknown. Beauty there was inherent; it had no aids. While a more sophisticated eye than Henry's would have understood that somewhere in Ned's innocent past had come knowledge of how to make a deft touch here and impart a little tint there, to give aid to nature and add to natural charm.

She allowed her glance to float over toward Henry, rightly interpreted his stare and smiled on him demurely. But her companion was not so content.

"Why don't he come?" she said impatiently.

The heavy man reached Henry's side and inserted a hard thumb between his ribs. "Wake up and wait on the customers. What do you think you are here for, anyway?"

It dawned on Henry that the man had reference to the two visions at the rear table. So he should get to speak to Ned, hear her voice and perhaps—look into her lovely eyes. He approached.

"Is there something?"

Ned looked up at him, encountered his admiring stare and let her lashes fall until they brushed her soft cheek. "Give me a nut sundae," she breathed. Henry knew absolutely nothing of the nature of a nut sundae. But he pulled his eyes away, muttered something, and started toward the fountain.

"Here," Ned's companion recalled him crossly, "You didn't get my order. I want a pineapple dope."

Henry walked weakly away. A nut sundae was bad enough, but a pineapple dope was worse. He glanced about helplessly, only to see his employer following his movements with a cold eye.

One thing Henry did understand. He knew ice cream. He secured two saucers and on each put a generous helping; he found a smaller saucer and put on it a handful of crushed nuts he had discovered in a deep dish. So much for the nut sundae.

Now for the pineapple dope. One of the heavy bottles that lined the counter was marked pineapple and contained an amber fluid. He chuckled his relief on noting this. They couldn't fool him! A row of very slender glasses stood ready to hand. He filled one of these with the amber fluid.

"Here you are, girls," he announced genially.

"Thank you," Ned smiled, and again allowed him a deep draft from the wells of her eyes.

The result intoxicated. Gently he pressed the dime she held out to him back into her palm and closed her soft fingers over it. "Don't mention it," he said fervently.

A stout lady entered at this period and plumped down at an adjoining table. Aware now of what was expected of him Henry approached her in easy manner.

"Give me a dish of ice cream, large size," she ordered.

Ah, this was a language he understood. Gratitude for the stout lady warmed him. The portion he gave her was indeed of large size.

214 Singing Mountains

A youth with an indolent air strolled into the store and draped himself wearily over a stool. "Cocoa-cola," he sighed.

Another who spoke in Henry's mother tongue! He passed a small bottle over the counter. He was beginning to feel sure of himself. Already he visualized five silver dollars, hard and round, that would be his at the end of the week. With this wealth—— His eyes wandered toward Ned. . . .

At Barren Rocks the clerk in the store kept the change in his pocket and made settlement at the end of each week. Henry likewise deposited receipts in his pocket, failing to see the cash drawer that stood handy.

Entered a gentleman who was obviously a citizen of the great Outside. He was large and florid; on his finger glittered a great diamond, and from the folds of his red tie another shot forth its rays. He sat down very near the fountain, leaned back, tipped his hat back on his head, inserted his fingers in the armpits of a fancy vest and gave his order.

"Gimme a fizzer!"

Henry caught the eye of the proprietor upon him, reflected that a show of experience was especially desirable here, and turned nonchalantly toward the fountain.

A fizzer was demanded, eh? Very well, a fizzer it should be. He recalled that the fountain fizzed when tampered with. Evidently this was an order to be filled from the fountain. Securing a large bowl, he held it under the faucet and pressed down on the valve.

"Pss-s-s-t!" the thing hissed.

Henry felt that the fizzer was to be a success.

A needle-like stream shot into the bowl and produced a boiling foam. When the bowl was full, he set it down defiantly in front of the citizen of the great Outside. That individual looked first at it, then at Henry. A stupid expression came over his florid countenance. He looked again at the bowl, then around him in a dazed way.

The heavy proprietor had been watching all from a convenient distance. He had seen the money returned to Ned, the money that went into Henry's own pocket. Now at this final outrage his face set and he strode forward.

"Come here, young man," he snapped.

Henry stepped over to him.

"Here's fifty cents. Take that money out of your pocket, take off that apron and git. Don't let me see you around here again."

Crestfallen and amazed, Henry obeyed. He took the apron off and laid it on a chair. He got his own coat from its nail in the little press, put it on and went out. Just as he passed through the door he observed Ned and her companion standing on the sidewalk.

"Then I'll see you at the show to-night."

"All right, girlie. I'll be there," Ned answered, and tripped gracefully down the street.

Desire gripped Henry as he saw her skipping along. Seen thus she was even more alluring than she had been at the little table. He overtook her.

"Hello," he said, smiling down at her. "Guess I will walk down this way, too, if you don't mind."

"O, it's you, is it?" she laughed. "I thought you were back in the store."

"I quit him. No future there."

"Where are you going now?"

"I'll walk around a little if you will go with me."

To his intense delight she agreed to this. They turned

about and together walked up to and through the grounds surrounding the capitol.

To him she was as a girl from another world. Her clothes were different, fragile and new and soft; her walk was different, easy and graceful and seductive. Her lips were the crushed petals of a rose and her eyes soft pansies.

They went into another part of town; and ahead Henry saw hanging out over the street a sign bearing two words: Ice Cream. He felt impelled by a double desire to take Ned into this establishment: he wanted to order certain things and see what he got, and he wanted to do the right thing by Ned.

They sat at a table far back in the dark room. A white clad youth sprang out as if by magic.

"A nut sundae," Ned ordered.

"Gimme a fizzer," directed Henry.

Consumed with curiosity he tried to keep his eye on the boy to discover how he should make a fizzer, but he could learn nothing from his deft movements over by the fountain.

He was back in an incredibly short time. The nuts were poured over the cream in the sundae; he had not been so far wrong there. The fizzer was in a tall glass. It nipped his tongue and scalded his throat as he drank it.

"Fine stuff," he declared bravely.

Again outside, a strong desire swept over Henry never again to be separated from this lovely vision by his side. "Where do you live?" he asked her eagerly.

"Down on Kanawha street."

"I want to come to see you."

"O, you must not, yet."

The last word gave him hope. It showed she consid-

ered him eligible. Even this was more than he had hoped. But he bethought himself.

"Go with me to the show to-night," he suggested.

"But I was to go with Nina."

"You can go with her some other night."

"Well," she hesitated. Then, "All right," she accepted his invitation with her ready smile.

"Where will I get you?"

"Why not meet in front of the post office."

"All right."

"At seven, then."

Promptly at seven Henry was in front of the post office building. Ben had demanded to know where he was going, but he could get scant information. Henry slipped out and was gone.

At Barren Rocks appointments were seldom made by the clock. Church services—about the only occasions where people met by specific appointment—were held in the morning when people arrived, and of evenings at early lamp-lighting. But here, it seemed, things were done differently.

All at once Henry felt a great shame for the crude life of the mountains. The backwoods town, the uncouth people, even his own home up on the hill—he was ashamed of everything.

Jennie, for instance. He thought of her. How out of place and awkward she would be here among these well dressed and versatile people! How even her clothes were shown up by Ned's!

He saw Ned approaching, and advanced quickly to meet her. She was dressed in blue, not the thick blue of gingham or the starchy blue of calico, but something that clung to her and revealed under its soft folds every graceful movement of her throbbing body. "Tell me about yourself!" he asked, taking her arm and piloting her toward the theatre.

"You tell me about yourself," she countered.

Eagerly he complied; but one knowing his past would have been truly amazed at what he said. Some quite astounding information was brought forth: It developed in the course of his narrative that he was an educated man of no little means, who had been born and reared in the city.

"How wonderful," she said when he had finished. "And to think that you noticed me!" She said this last with an air of sweet humility.

"Notice you! It's you noticing me."

The theatre was darkened when they entered. He found a seat quite well back and near the wall. She took it and settled down cozily, while he sat down beside her.

He put his arm on the back of her seat and gradually let it fall until it encircled her. She minded not at all, but leaned slightly toward him. So close they sat that once when she lifted her head to whisper something, their lips almost met.

To Henry, who had never seen anything like it, the show was wonderful. Peter Rhodes never preached against theatres, since they bothered Barren Rocks not at all, but privately he often referred to them as vices of Sodom. So that on the few occasions when Henry had had opportunity to go to shows at Sistersville, it was always to closely guarded performances.

But wonderful as this show was, it did not interest him as Ned did. Her real name, she told him in pretty confidence, was not Ned, but Edna. But he liked the familiar transposition and told her so in an intimate whisper. When he reached his room that night he found on the stand two letters. One was from Jennie. His lip curled as he lifted it up. Breaking the seal he perused it hastily, then crumpled it up and threw it to the floor.

"Maybe she sees by this time I am not an awkward fool," he said shortly. "She may learn in time that there are other pebbles on the beach."

Jennie's letter consequently went unanswered.

The other was from Anne Rhodes. The seal had been broken and the sheets were wooled as if the prostrate figure asleep on the bed had gone over them again and again.

She wrote in her subdued style an account of happenings since they had gone away. The days were getting cold, but Peter Rhodes was snaking in plenty of wood; the garden had turned out exceptionally well: the potatoes and cabbage were holed up; the chestnuts had fallen and there was some talk of a party's being made up to go to the mountains for a few days and gather some.

Jennie had been over once, had asked about them and got their address; hounds had been chasing foxes about for the last few days: Nathan Mallory allowed foxes would be plentiful this year.

Nathan, by the way, was coming to church again, regularly. He had confessed his error and been reinstated. Now he was laboring to have Tate Spraggs converted, but Tate was stubborn and would not listen to him.

Henry read the letter the second time, and from the way it stirred him he was not greatly surprised at Ben's violent outburst the following morning.

"Hen, what are we hanging around here for?" he demanded.

"What else could we do?"

"We might go home!" A shamed but defiant look came into his eyes.

"No!" The word escaped Henry before he was aware of it, for he had thought instantly of Ned. "I mean," he amended lamely, "there would be no sense in that."

"O, I saw you out with that girl. You didn't see me when I went to the office. See me! You didn't have any eyes."

"There's nothing wrong in that."

"She will cut you," Ben predicted, thinking his own thoughts.

"Don't you think it."

"I am going home."

"I wouldn't do that, Bennie."

Never did the city seem so attractive to him. He thought he simply could not leave it. Kanawha street was near; Ned had left him with half veiled eyes that had given great promise.

"How would you get there?" he pressed.

"Walk."

"You couldn't make it in a week."

"But I could make it some time. Anything would beat this."

Even to talk of home helped. He thought of arriving and seeing the place: the lower bars with their sassafras slats smooth at each end; the old house with its gray logs and the cracks stopped up with clay; the hard packed yard: the children of the New Manse were too lively to give grass time to grow in the yard; the palings of yard and garden, the stable with the crib to the right.

"I am going to start!" he cried.

"Don't, Ben. Wait a day or two."

"What for? You won't work." He wished he had

not said that the minute it was out of his mouth, for he understood Henry.

"I'll get work to-day."

"I'll wait till to-morrow, but no longer."

With time circumscribed, Henry felt he must rush his acquaintance with Ned. Of course he didn't reason why; who would? He wanted mightily to make love to her, and the fact of his desire was sufficient.

Given a month or two he might have been content to go slowly, advancing in his courtship from stage to stage. But with Ben in this mood he was likely to have to leave at any time. And he was determined not to go till he had held Ned in his arms.

She had not told him exactly where she lived, so he could not go to the house after her. But with the coming of afternoon he walked slowly up and down Capitol street, going as far as the capitol building, turning and walking back again.

He found her. She came walking up the street—floating, perhaps, would be more accurate. Charming, graceful, one hand swinging at her side and the other in the pocket of her sweater; and when she reached him he caught the sweet perfume of her person.

"Will we walk around again?"

She nodded brightly, he fell in beside her eagerly, and they walked leisurely up the street. His heart pounded with a great joy and a great resolve also: he was glad to be with her, and he would make love to her if he could find opportunity.

He was hoping a seat in the capitol grounds might be vacant. The afternoon was a mellow one, and they could well sit out there. But every seat was full. He was disappointed. But he brightened: he might talk to her as they walked along.

"You are a beautiful girl," he told her, in the correct stiff language of the grammar.

"You don't mean it!"

"I thought so from the first."

"When did you see me first?" Of course she did not know!

"Down at the drug store, when you came in."

"Maybe you thought that about Nina, too." She didn't believe him, to be sure, but she wanted to hear more!

"Not a bit of it."

He looked at her as he said it, and she in turn looked at him. A lovely flush stole into her face and a delighted eagerness was in her eyes.

"You say that to every girl you go with. You city boys go with a different one every few weeks!"

Henry hesitated. It pleased him for her to think of him as a fast city boy, yet he wanted to convince her that to him she was more than any other girl. He compromised.

"O, we are not that bad, I guess," he deprecated modestly. Then after a slight pause, "But we find the right one at last," he declared earnestly.

"Say, Hen," Ben's voice spoke at his elbow, "I got another letter from mother a little while ago."

Henry was annoyed that Ben should appear at this of all times; also that he should have been so absorbed as not to notice his approach. Ben himself was an embarrassment. Ned was looking at him in a way that demanded explanation.

"This is my brother," Henry said awkwardly.

"You look a lot like him," Ned laughed.

This annoyed Henry excessively. "Do you want anything, Ben?" he asked pointedly.

"I wanted to tell you what mother said. The trustees had a meeting and said they were expecting you to teach the school and were not going to look for anyone else. Mother wants us to come back home."

"Where is the letter?" Henry asked, forgetting Ned for the moment.

"Down at our room. But mother says she wants us to leave here and come back home."

"But I thought you lived here!" Ned exclaimed to Ben.

"Live here!" Ben's voice told her that nothing on earth could induce him to live in such a hole. "Live here!"

"But you told me---?" She turned to Henry.

Henry felt that he could better extricate himself from this dilemma if Ben were not in his presence. "I tell you, Ben," he said, "you go down and be getting ready. I'll be down in a little while."

"Then we will start back to-day?"

"I'll see when I get down."

But even with Ben out of the way Ned was not so easily won back. She demanded flatly to know why Henry had lied to her.

"But," she ended almost contemptuously, "I was just saying you told every girl you saw some such stuff as that."

Henry saw his chances for intimacy fading, but he rallied to save what he could. "But I don't!" he protested. "I told you the truth."

"You do live here, then?"

"I mean the other thing-about you."

"I believe it is time for me to be going home now. I should have been back before this."

"But stay, Ned."

"Not to-day."

He clutched at this. "Then to-morrow?"

"You will be going home then."

"But I'll show you!" he cried. "I'll meet you here to-morrow and show you I meant what I said."

But the arrangement did not suit Ben. "Another day!" he wailed. "We could be away up the river by that time."

"But I may find work," Henry urged.

"I don't want you to find work. I want to go home."

"Ben, you do this for me, and I'll do something for you some time. You wait over to-morrow and we will start early day after and get as far as we can. We will have a great time tramping along.

"I will get us some tobacco and we will take matches and salt and catch fish and camp out. What if it does take us a week? We can have all the fun we want!"

The prospect appealed even to Henry, for after all the old life was in his blood. But it captivated Ben more, since he was not thinking of Ned.

"All right," he promised. "We will be ready day after to-morrow morning, early."

His end gained, Henry began to mark time till the next afternoon. He tried to read, but gave up the attempt; he went to bed early and hoped he should sleep late. But he got up earlier than usual and walked about the town, stopping every time the clock on the capitol spire struck, and checking off the hours.

A little after twelve he was on Capitol street, walking up and down and watching. He was framing up answers for Ned; planning how he should approach her with the suggestion that they walk up on the hill and see the reservoir.

Yes, on the hill overlooking the city was the open reservoir, and it was a favorite pastime to go up there and

look around. Beyond the reservoir was the cemetery with its winding secluded walks and inviting benches. Henry wanted to take Ned up to the reservoir.

He fell to speculating on how she should look this afternoon: the dress she would be wearing, how she would come floating toward him, the look of her eyes as she greeted him. And in the midst of these thoughts he heard her laughter behind him.

He knew it was her laughter; no one else could laugh like that. Following closely the laughter, he heard her speak to Nina who laughed also.

He turned. Ned was coming toward him, but she was not alone. By her side was a gangling youth who seemed to Henry the epitome of ugliness. Behind them came Nina, also with a young man.

The smile died on Henry's face and unconsciously he shrank toward the curb. He really did not know what he was doing. He stared at Ned as she approached; she seemed unconscious of his proximity.

Just as she was passing she looked haughtily in his direction and gave a curt little nod. The young man with her touched his hat indifferently and the four walked on.

Laughter floated back to Henry and affected him like a slap in the face. He started down toward the Westtern Union almost at a trot. He went inside and looked around. Ben was sitting moodily over in the corner. Henry signaled him.

"Hurry up, Ben, and get out of here. It is time for us to start home."

"But I thought---"

"Sure. But we had as well start now. Come on. We can be away up the river before it is time to pitch camp."

A look of rapture came over Ben's face. He turned and hurried away. When he came back a few moments

Singing Mountains

226

later he was all ready. "Did you get the tobacco and things?"

"No," Henry replied. "You can go and get them while I go down and be getting ready."

It must have been near three o'clock when they reached a little rise on the outskirts of the city and stopped to look back. The big railroad bridge was a boundary beyond which was the city with its circumscribed area and cramped life.

Then they faced up the river. Ten miles or so away the hills came down to the banks and joined hands; there was about them at that distance a hint of rock cliffs and caves and pines and thick underbrush.

And away on up beyond the second range of hills and visible only to the mind, the old river idled through Barren Rocks to the Valley of the Moon; Little Creek wound up past the store and the school house to the far hills at its source.

In the saddle-back of the hill that overlooked the landing above the shoals was the Manse with its gray logs and packed yard.

"Let's go," Ben said.

Chapter 11

THE RETURN

I T was Saturday afternoon. Peter Rhodes was going to saddle the horse, for he was soon to start to his appointment. He would preach at Oakum Mills the next day; and as it was miles out the ridge he needs must start Saturday afternoon in order to be there for the Sunday morning service.

He went out the kitchen door and up the hard path to the stable. The air was chilly: there was hint of storm in it. And drearily he thought of the miles that lay before him, miles when the horse should walk slowly in the narrow road, miles when he should now and then pass a small house set down in a clearing, or follow the rail fences with the poison ivy vines entangled about the black rails. He remembered a big dead pine that stood alone and naked in the gap of a ridge; he could see this tree for an hour before getting to it, and the hour seemed more like an age. He thought of the endless creakcreak of the saddle as the horse walked on and on and on, with never the sound of a voice.

He went into the stable. Both Bill and Bird whinnied; they seemed ever hungry. As Peter Rhodes reached up to get his saddle from the wooden peg, he saw the side-saddle.

He stopped to look at it. It was the side-saddle he had got for Anne Rhodes—a soft saddle made of yellow leather, with horns very firm and dependable and little

stirrup of nickel—and which he used to put on Bird back in the days when his wife always went with him.

He recalled how the two of them together had traveled this road to Oakum Mills—how he had ridden old Bill, big, rough, stolid but dependable Bill, while she had ridden Bird, Bird gray and round of back and given to an easy rack.

Coming to level places, they had raced, Anne Rhodes always winning, for old Bill pounded along awkwardly, and waiting for him with flushed face and glowing eyes. Or if they happened to get a late start on Saturday afternoon, she would secrete in the saddle-pockets a fine lunch and bring it forth just when he was beginning to get a little cross.

It was much easier to visit about when she was along. She talked and sang and made everybody easy, while he did little more than sit proudly by and look on. But when she was not with him, he had to do most of the talking himself.

He had never minded the long road when she was with him. For as they had ridden along they had talked of the doctrines and about the Old Manse, and later about the children—talked the hours away and arrived at their journey's end all too soon.

But now—. He thought again of the old dead pine away ahead in the gap, and how long he could see it before finally getting to it, and how the saddle should creak-creak, creak-creak, all the time. He turned suddenly and went down to the house.

"Anne," he began dubiously, "do you think you could go along this trip? The weather may fair up."

Her face lighted up. She wanted him to want her. "I am not sure, Tommy. Do you think I could?" she

looked at him uncertainly, yet as if hoping he might think so.

"Do you feel good?"

"Fine as ever!"

"I might saddle Bird."

"But I couldn't do it, Tommy." She spoke rapidly, as if to put temptation away from her before she succumbed. "I never could."

As he tightened the girth of the saddle under Bird, he knew she was right. The move up on to the hill had helped, but still she could not stand what she once could.

He swung into the saddle, drew from its hiding-place the switch that he always kept sticking in a cranny of the crib when not in use, tightened up on the reins and started away.

Anne Rhodes sat where she could see him from the one window of the living-room. She saw Bird (he rode Bird when she was not along, for Bill was very rough) walk slowly up the hill to the upper bars, saw Peter Rhodes let down the top slats, cross over and turn to put them up again.

She lost sight of him while he went through the woods that covered the side of the hill, but she saw him when he came out over near Johnson's Gap. He was too far away for her to see his face or indeed to distinguish his features. But as he went up toward the Gap both he and the horse were silhouetted against the sky: Bird walking slowly, Peter Rhodes holding the reins and slouching slightly in the saddle.

He reached the Gap where the way turned and led him toward the ridge and the old dead pine. For a moment he stopped, turned in the saddle and faced the Manse. Then he disappeared and Anne Rhodes was alone.

Singing Mountains

Suddenly it seemed to her that she would give her soul to be on Bird and trotting along by his side. Even as he had, so she imaged the road to the Mills and pictured the trip over it. But she couldn't quite make it, any more. . . .

"What are you crying about, mother?" Little Anne asked at her side.

"I am not crying, honey. I have nothing to cry about."

"But there are tears in your eyes."

"It is nothing."

280

But Little Anne was not to be put away like that. "I know what it is, mother," she said softly, with an understanding beyond her years. "You want to go with father."

"It is nothing, Little Anne." But it was really that day that Little Anne began to take the place in her mother's heart that Margaret had filled: a place of intimacy, of giving and receiving confidences, of planning and dreaming dreams together.

When Little Anne left her, Anne Rhodes began to bring out memories. First Margaret had gone away, then Henry and for a time Ben, and now both Ben and Henry were gone. Even Peter Rhodes was away and would not be back before Monday afternoon.

That left her with Little Anne. . . . They should build a big fire in the fireplace and sit close after supper. . . . The book about Jesse James was somewhere near. . . .

When night fell there was fire in the fireplace, and the two sat before it. It was very dark outside; perhaps it was eight o'clock. Anne Rhodes was thinking. . . . He had got to Oakum Mills by this time; he had had his supper, and was now sitting by the fire talking.

He was to stay with Brack Jordan, and even now was doubtless talking to him. Brack was often troubled

spiritually: he couldn't understand prophecy and sometimes thought he was unworthy to be saved. At this moment Peter Rhodes might be reassuring him. . . .

Little Anne was dressing a doll near the fireplace. She had some cloth and a threaded needle, and was engaged in the absorbing task of fitting a new petticoat. She called it an underskirt.

Old Dan Tucker on the railroad track With a big steam engine on his back! The engine busted and the pieces flew, And tore old Daniel right in two!

Git out o' the way for old Dan Tucker, Git out o' the way for old Dan Tucker, Git out o' the way for old Dan Tucker, Come too late for to git his supper!

"Who is that singing?" Anne Rhodes asked with sudden interest.

"Maybe Charlie Snowden with his banjo!" Little Anne cried.

"He's more likely somewhere he oughtn't to be!"

Old Dan Tucker, he got drunk, And fell in the fire and kicked up a chunk! But he got a hot coal in his shoe And good Lord A'mighty how the ashes flew.

"Anne! That's Ben and Henry."

"It is, it is!" Little Anne panted. "They've come back. O, goody, goody."

But the voices without still kept up their serenade. Ben's strident and uncertain, was carrying the tune, while Henry's with slightly more body was deep in the bass.

Old Dan Tucker went to town
And he swallowed a whiskey barrel right down!

What happened to this remarkable man after such a feat, they did not say. Anne Rhodes threw the door open and rushed out.

"Now, boys!" she laughed happily. "I know it's you. Come on in here."

The boys came in and were hardly settled when the question of nourishment came up. It seemed they wanted something to eat, very badly and at once.

"But there isn't a thing cooked in the house," Anne Rhodes cried helplessly. When her husband went away she did not attempt to get full regular meals as she had to when he was at home.

But it developed there was a churn of cream sitting near the fire; and on seeing it Ben blessed old Boss, the evil black cow, for the first time in his experience.

A hungry man will offer no objections to a lunch of cream and cold pone. But there were eggs besides, and in a very short time they were in the ashes, water had been poured over them to keep them from bursting, and they were roasting.

The boys did not suffer from hunger

Sunday was a beautiful day. The storm had gone round, leaving a clear-blown sky and a warming sun. There was chill in the slight wind, but in the sun where the wind did not strike it was very mellow.

Jennie, all unsuspecting but drawn by a void she found it impossible to fill, came over in the afternoon. She came up the back way, climbing the steep hill from the river.

Henry was the first person to see her, and the sight brought back all his old desire. He forgot about Ned as though she had never been; he knew now it was Jennie that had brought him back from Charleston the while he pretended to have no thought of her. "Well!" he said as she approached. "I was just getting ready to go over to see you."

He surprised her. She had not been expecting him. Her face for an instant turned pale; she stopped abruptly. Then she blushed and took a step back.

"Are you here?" There was a gladness in her voice that she strove to control.

"Wait and I will show you."

He went near her and put his hands on her shoulders. His lips were against hers before she seemed to recover from her surprise. Then she sprang back, the old roguish look in her eyes.

"That's a way to tell me."

"Don't believe it yet? All right. I'll-"

"I guess you will not. I came to see your mother."

"She said you were here once before."

This brought her up short. It was all right, this coming over. She had wanted to see his mother. But it—after all, he had not written to her. Nor had he answered the letter she had written. And now he expected her to act as if nothing had ever happened. Just as if he might do anything he pleased and yet be sure of her!

"And it is easy to go back again," she said, a sudden sharpness in her voice.

There was more to her meaning than was in her words, and he knew it. "I know, Jennie," he said penitently. "I know I shouldn't have done it, and I want you to forgive me."

This mollified her a little. But, "Why didn't you answer my letter?" she demanded.

He had no ready answer except the truth; and here was a place where the truth was most certainly out of place. "I never got it," he said.

"Never got it?"

284 Singing Mountains

"I don't believe you ever wrote one." He was trying to find a flaw in her. It would make it so much simpler if he could find one; he might even turn the tables.

"But I did," she protested.

"Then someone at the store has opened it and read it," he said angrily. Thus another ember was added to the fires of suspicion that were crackling about Herb Ellanger, the new clerk at the store.

"The old spy," she spat, "that's not the only time."

"Sure it's not." Henry had laid his sins on a propitious scapegoat. "We'll have to see about it, too. I went away because I thought you didn't—didn't care for me. And I never got a line."

"Poor boy," and her voice was soft. "You never should have gone."

"Then you will not be mad?"

"There now. Are you sure that was why you left?" She wanted to hear further about this interesting cause of his leaving.

"Charlie said you called me an awkward fool."

"But I didn't! I didn't!"

"How am I to know?" He had now turned the tables and was going to take full advantage.

"Henry!"

"Prove it."

"What can I say?" she wailed. "You know I didn't."

"I will if——" He went to her; she stood perfectly still. His arms slipped about her, their lips met and her soft cheek pressed for an instant against his.

"Do you believe me?"

"Once more. . . . I do now!"

All of which Ben saw from the vantage point of the stable roof. He was doing some hard thinking. Indirect questioning of Little Anne had revealed the fact that Grouchie McRand had been excessively friendly with Essie while he had been away, and he was pondering ways and means.

"We are going for a walk, Ben," Little Anne informed him suddenly, her eyes barely on a level with the roof. "Mother says to come on."

It was one of the old Sunday afternoon walks which he had taken since he could remember. They set out about two and went up by Crow Point and then down into the deep hollow toward Honnell's Gap.

The leaves had fallen to some extent and lay crisp and brown on the ground. The acorns from the white and black oaks were thick on the ground, and beech nuts were plentiful. These latter they gathered and ate, deftly opening the little triangles to get at the rich creamy kernels within.

They ran across many droves of razorbacks, long of legs and thin of backs, feeding voraciously on the rich mast. Ben and Little Anne looked far and wide for a hog's nest, hoping to find a litter of little pigs.

All hogs were branded and allowed to run at large about Barren Rocks. Peter Rhodes' brand was a V cut from the left ear. To Little Anne's unspeakable delight she found, in a deep drift of leaves that filled a depression in the ground, one of their own hogs with a litter of small black pigs. There were nine of them.

"O, mother!" she cried, "let me take one of them home."

"But you can't. They are not weaned."

The little things were very pretty, what with their soft little legs and pink feet, and the rakish way they had of cocking their small heads to one side to regard these strange people.

Ben essayed to pick one up, but the great bony sow

making for him with mouth open and emitting a terrible noise, he put it down quickly and got out of her way.

"I must tell Tommy about them, so he can look after them before it gets too cold," Anne Rhodes said.

They went on, stopping to look at everything of interest: a robin's nest, now filled with leaves; the little furlined hole in the ground where an old mother rabbit had nourished her babes; a cocoon swinging on a slender ironwood limb; the round pebbles that lay on the bottom of the little rivulet that ran down in the hollow; or the moist moss that grew atop the sand-covered stones.

Thus they secured their education, an empirical knowledge of things as they are. To tell an oak leaf from a beech or hickory or sarvis; to distinguish by taste the sassafras from the birch; to recognize by its song the red bird from the wren, and by its actions the shitepoke from the dipper; to distinguish on the soft sand in the hollow the track of the mink from that of a stolid old opossum, such was their education of information.

Henry and Jennie did not walk along in any definite manner. They lagged behind, or they went far on ahead, or they worked out into the top of a fallen tree and sat down on the branches and talked in low tones of matters that held them completely absorbed.

Anne Rhodes rested frequently. The climb up the hill toward the Gap was hard for her and left her panting. But her spirit was high and her love for this life absolute. She had been brought up to it, and to her there was nothing more wonderful than a tramp through the unbroken woods with all nature open to her inquisitive but sympathetic eye.

She turned aside somewhat to where Henry sat with Jennie in the top of a great beech that had been uprooted by a storm. Jennie perched lightly on a limb, making

a side-saddle of a little fork and riding it with airy delight, her feet swinging free. Henry watched her, anxious lest she fall, but eager to have her remain there so he could watch her.

"You remember, Henry," Anne Rhodes asked him, "what I said in my letter about going to Black Mountain after chestnuts?"

"Sure!" he answered expectantly.

"What do you say to it?"

"Can you go, Jennie?" he asked.

"I haven't been asked yet," she said slyly.

"Of course you will go, Jennie," Anne Rhodes said. "You people and the Evanses. The same ones we had at the Valley."

Ben, hovering near, pricked up his ears at this. "I think we ought to go," he declared feelingly.

"I'll see Tommy about it as soon as he gets back," Anne Rhodes went on. "We want to go before it gets too cold."

They went on as far as Honnell's Gap, and turned. The hills shut them in, but at that they could see south toward the river, and to the east Buzzard Roost was visible with its gray, sheer sides and top covered with blueberry bushes and scrub pines.

The tinkle of a cow-bell sounded from the river.

"I hear old Boss down at the Hingle Place," Anne Rhodes said. "Ben, you had better go from here and get her."

Many a criminal has heard sentence of imprisonment passed upon him with heart less heavy than Ben's when she made this suggestion. He wanted to go back in the friendly companionship of the others.

But he obeyed. When almost out of sight he turned and looked back. There they all were, intimate, friendly

288

Singing Mountains

and having a good time, just starting back, while his way lay toward the river and he should travel it alone.

It was getting late. The chill of evening had already set in; shadows were moving east. Ben hastened forward, stopped to listen, and heard over toward the river the tinkle of the bell. The river would be getting black . . . it would be colder down there. . . .

Chapter 12

THE CAMP AT BLACK MOUNTAIN

THE road was caked hard, but it was not smooth. Months old horse tracks had dried as winter left them and stood up like cups unfinished of the potter's hand. Or an ox's track sunk down and was preserved as by a cast of plaster of Paris, old evidence that the ridge lumbermen had snaked their logs that way the previous spring.

Bird traveled the road easily, her sleek sides testimony of a pleasant summer and her friendly eyes evidence that she was accustomed to kind treatment from her human taskmasters.

Anne Rhodes sat on Bird. Lightly she perched in the saddle, her hand holding the reins resting on the pommel. Her foot was in the nickel stirrup, but neither foot nor stirrup could be seen. She was wearing her riding-skirt, a long sable garment that fell inches below her skirt and undulated with the motion of the horse.

Anne Rhodes' face was flushed. She had a way of coloring rosily when pleasantly excited, little spots first apearing in her cheeks and spreading until her whole face was soft crimson.

She was pleasantly excited now. She was going to Black Mountain for chestnuts. She was in the saddle again: nobody but one accustomed to the saddle from infancy can measure the delight of the feel of a mettle-some and responsive horse.

Behind her on Bird's back was Little Anne, her hands resting at her mother's sides. Now she was looking back to see where the others were, and again she was leaning sidewise to look at the road ahead.

A little to the rear came Peter Rhodes, very relaxed and verbose for the Baptist Parson. Riding old Bill, he carried his rifle in his hand, and when not trying to race or when not talking or singing, was scanning the woods on either side the road alert for game.

He bethought him of something. "Wait a minute, Anne," he called. "I have something to tell you."

She waited until he came abreast of her.

"There was an Advent exhorter preached at Oakum Mills Sunday before last," he said. The tone of his voice informed her that he was immensely tickled.

"What was his name?"

"Brother McWhorter. He is very ignorant: can hardly read or write. What do you suppose his text was?"

"What was it?" Her interest was up now.

"'He maketh my feet like hens' feet.'"

"You mean like hinds' feet," she corrected him.

"No I don't. The passage reads, 'He maketh my feet like hinds' feet.' But as I say, Brother McWhorter is ignorant; he got the words wrong and preached about the Lord making his feet like hens' feet."

"But what did he mean?"

"He said a hen has a toe at either side so she can't slip either to the right or to the left; and she has a front toe to keep her from slipping forward: he said an Advent is never froward. And," here his eyes twinkled, "she has a little toe behind to keep her from backsliding.

"He said that proves the Methodists are wrong when they say you can backslide, for the Lord maketh our feet like hens' feet, and hens have little toes behind to keep them from sliding backward."

At this Peter Rhodes broke into song, singing a stanza that began with, "Pull, sailor, pull! Oh, pull for the shore!" and which he always sang when excessively mirthful.

Ben sat on old Bill's bare back behind his father, and when the horse would break into a ponderous trot, Peter Rhodes would put his hand on Ben's leg to steady him. Old Bill was not designed as a saddler.

One of Ben's first memories was of sitting thus behind his father, holding to him to keep from falling off, and feeling his father's hand on his leg when the horse trotted.

Henry had a horse for himself on this special occasion and so did Jennie. When the road permitted she and Henry rode side by side, talking. Ben often wondered what they found to talk about.

Martha Jones was sick and could not make the trip, and Caleb had stayed behind with her. But Elizabeth Evans was there with her husband, and behind the latter rode Essie.

The party reached Black Mountain in the forenoon. They had left home early so as to get there in time for dinner. Immediately on arriving, the work of setting up camp was begun.

Many blankets were brought forth, some that had been carried in bundles and others that had been used on the way over as saddle blankets. They were spread out in the sun to air, for they should serve as beds for the night.

The horses were tethered to bushes near the site of the camp and fed ear corn. To their crunching was soon added the crackle of the fire. Above all rose the sounds of jubilation.

They were on the top of the mountain. For a small space the trees grew sparse, and here was the immemorial camping-ground. Looking west from the summit, it seemed the great stretch of unbroken wilderness would never end: mile after mile of trees, the gray of the white oaks and the dark of the black oaks; the white of the poplar and the brown of the sycamore; and away off near what looked like a stream, the green of pines.

There were rock cliffs on the side of a neighboring mountain to the north, great crumbling piles of gray and dark stones, hinting of caves and rendezvous.

A considerable distance below these cliffs, the front supported by nothing more than upright poles, was a cabin of logs roofed with clapboards, from whose uneven stone chimney a pencil of blue smoke curled lazily aloft.

Dinner was soon ready, for all had been prepared in advance save the coffee. Peter Rhodes always insisted that the coffee be made fresh each meal, served hot and strong with plenty of essence. Accordingly it was now black and steaming hot and sent forth a rich, pungent odor.

"Did you put in the essence, Anne?" Peter Rhodes asked.

"Taste it and see," she challenged.

The bulk of the meal was rabbit. Boiled long and then fried brown, the best pieces had been saved and brought along. The hind legs and the meaty backs were cold and seasoned with salt baken in; and holding a piece of rabbit in one hand and a cut of pone in the other, the members of the party stood around the fire and ate.

Everything was eaten up. It always was. Anne

Rhodes once declared she could never make sure whether she had cooked a meal, as it disappeared before she had really got acquainted with it.

She stayed behind with Elizabeth Evans while the others spread about over the mountain to search for chestnuts. The fox grapes were plentiful; trees now almost leafless showed the brown nests squirrels had fashioned in the spring; spignel and nettles and water weeds were falling for the winter round the old spring; a pheasant beat a quickening tattoo on a rotting log somewhere apart. And everywhere was clean atmosphere, cool healthfulness and the stimulating odor of the woods.

Henry did a very characteristic thing. Finding a chestnut tree that had dropped dusky nuts from cracking burs, he made sure of a seat where these burs would not interfere, gathered enough chestnuts to satisfy him and his, sat down where he might lean comfortably back, and demanded that Jennie sit beside him.

For one who had come miles on horseback to gather chestnuts for the winter, she made a very feeble protest. He got her hand and pulled her down so that she sat very near him.

"The others will find plenty for us all," she said as a final palliative to a very-willing-to-be-silenced conscience.

She put a chestnut between her teeth and cracked it. He watch the small white teeth bite into the brown-black hull, and then leaned toward her.

"Sure," he agreed eagerly. "We might as well stay here"

She seemed quite small as she sat there, with a crown of soft hair the color of the silk on a roasting-ear just before it is ready to pull. And her blue eyes that ever held the dream-depth of the unsophisticated, had perfect setting in her lovely face.

Henry wanted to see whether he could reach round her waist with thumb and middle finger of each hand. But she would not hear of it.

"I can't help it if I am small," she pouted prettily. Jennie was expert at drawing Henry out!

"Small! But I like you that way," he protested naïvely.

"Do you?" she asked him meditatively.

Ben, quite a half mile away and further down the mountain, was advancing his cause in a quite different manner. Essie was with him. He had seen to that, though had he had eyes to see he might have observed in her a certain willingness to be managed.

"I'll bet I can get a cupful before you can!" he challenged her. Each was carrying a quart cup.

"You can't do it," she answered, bridling.

Ensued a wild scramble. Leaves were clawed away to reveal the chestnuts underneath, there was the frequent clank as a nut was thrown into a cup, then a scurry for another. Each glanced at the other frequently, fearing what might be seen.

Ben did beat her. "Mine is full!" he exulted at last. "Let me see what you've got."

"No, sir, no, sir!" she cried. "I won't do it. Yours is not full."

But it was, and she finally acknowledged defeat, though somewhat grudgingly. Ben swaggered after that, conscious that underneath her grudging manner was admiration.

Then she raked among the leaves and uncovered a copperhead. It was a little late for them, but this old fellow had doubtless crawled out to sun himself in the feeble warmth of an autumn afternoon.

But he became aggressive when his repose was dis-

turbed. Slowly and without noise he drew back into a coil, his tongue playing in and out the while. His cold lidless eyes bickered wickedly.

Essie was almost petrified. Just one small scream and she sprang back shuddering. Then came the invariable look about her to see whether there were others—maybe right under her feet.

Ben was afraid of snakes, but he fairly beamed at the opportuneness of this situation: Essie cringing in terror, and before her the fat-bellied, flat-headed snake!

"I'll get him," he cried, and suppressing an inward nausea he grabbed a broken limb and advanced.

He got him, and with true masculine delight in the thrill of a gruesome situation, balanced the ugly thing over the broken club and looked at it.

"He is a monster," was his opinion.

"Put it down." Essie shuddered.

He looked at her and saw her face was white. As on another occasion when he saw her flutter of nervousness in his presence, so now her tremulousness aroused something tender within him. He flung the snake far down the hill.

"He won't hurt you now," he assured her.

Suppose you hadn't been here!"

"It was nothing," he said largely.

"But it was. I am glad I came with you."

"Honest?"

She nodded.

When the workers returned to camp toward evening, there was a great pile of chestnuts to show for the afternoon. A meal sack with a capacity for two bushels was filled just full enough to tie comfortably.

"But where are yours, Henry?" Peter Rhodes asked with assumed seriousness.

246 Singing Mountains

"Couldn't find any," Henry answered shortly. Iennie blushed.

"We got some, didn't we, Essie?" Ben asked maliciously.

"A lot," she answered with a suggestion of comradery that warmed him to her.

The horses were led down to the old spring with the fallen spignel about it and watered. Then they were brought back, tied again to the saplings and curried and fed.

The blankets were rolled up so the dew would be kept off them till bedtime; supper was cooked and eaten; the fire replenished with many dead chunks, and everything made ready for the night.

The sun went down early, dropping behind a mountain far off in the southwest. The air became chilly, twilight had the color of pale blue, then of dusk, and at last night came.

The world had narrowed down. First the gathering night, like smoke creeping up a mountain, had shut off the distant hills; then the valleys had grown misty and been covered by sable mantle; and finally only the ruddy light of the campfire kept the blackness at bay.

From the little cabin to the north a cow-bell tinkled monotonously. A dog barked.

The stars came out, first looking pale like a dim figure on a dress of faded calico, then taking on a more positive color. But they seemed very far away and exceedingly cold.

"We killed a copperhead," Ben said suddenly.

There was no reply.

"It was hid right under the leaves," he continued.

"Ben! Hush it," Anne Rhodes commanded nervously.

"But we did!" he flared resentfully. He wanted to tell of it.

"Let's sing," she suggested. "Let's sing something."
"You start it," Peter Rhodes prompted.

An old negro camp meeting song that had been carried into Barren Rocks by a wandering hardshell exhorter came to her and she started it with enthusiasm.

If you get there before I do, And a wheel in the middle of a wheel! Look out for me—I'm a-comin' too, And a wheel in the middle of a wheel.

Whee-e-e-e-e-e-e-!
And a wheel in the middle of a wheel;
Whee-e-e-e-e-e-!
And a wheel in the middle of a wheel.

Old Satan's mad and I am glad! And a wheel in the middle of a wheel; He lost a soul he thought he had! And a wheel in the middle of a wheel!

Henry had found room by Jennie's side and the two sat very close, the warmth of their bodies drawing them closer. Ben sat opposite Essie, but he was aware of her presence and she of his. Anne Rhodes, head thrown back and in the fullest enjoyment of the song she was singing, sat near her husband and kept time with her hand. Arthur Evans and his wife, just a little less facile emotionally than the Rhodeses, nevertheless were trying to fit in with the situation.

The song finished, Peter Rhodes turned to his wife. "Anne," he said, "Sing 'Dark and Stormy is the Desert,' for us."

Immediately her whole attitude changed. From the genial abandon inspired by the rollicking rhythm of the

248 Singing Mountains

old camp meeting song, she became at once sober and reverent.

"Shall I?"

"Please do," he pressed.

She sang the old song, the one that had been in her family back at home, the one her father had taught her, sang it there by the campfire with Black Mountain holding them up.

Dark and stormy is the desert Through which pilgrims make their way; Yet beyond this vale of sorrow Lie the fields of perfect day. Fiends, loud howling in the desert, Make them tremble as they go; And the fiery darts of Satan Often bring their courage low.

He whose thunder shakes creation, He who bids the planets roll, He who rides upon the tempest And whose scepter ways are whole: Round him are ten thousand angels Ready to obey command. They are always hovering round you Till you reach the better land.

There a million flaming seraphs
Fly across the heavenly plains,
And they sing immortal praises—
Glory, glory, is their strain!
Yet methinks a sweeter concert
Makes the heavenly arches ring,
And the song is heard in Zion
Which the angels cannot sing!

There on flowery hills of pleasure Lie the fields of endless rest; Love and joy and peace forever Reign and triumph in each breast.

The Camp at Black Mountain

Hail, ye happy, happy spirits! Death no more shall make you fear; Sorrow, grief nor pain nor anguish Shall no more distress you there.

For some time after she had finished the others were silent. Her voice, throbbing with a note of triumph, died away in the forest. Then Peter Rhodes chuckled.

"Singing that 'Wheel in the Middle of a Wheel' made me think of it," he broke out. "Brother Iless brought that song back from Mississippi where he had been trying to convert the people.

"You remember, Anne, he was a hardshell Baptist. The hardshells sing a tune when they preach, and Brother Iless was preaching. So he started in his singsong way to tell of a trip he took to Virginia.

"'Oh-h-h, I went to Virginny, ah! And I stayed over there a long time, ah! And then one day I come back home, ah! The old dog, he was a-settin' in the yard, but he didn't know me, ah!'

"He commenced to cry at this, thinking how pathetic it was that his old dog had forgotten him. But he went on: 'And I stopped to listen, ah! I heard my boy a-playin' the fiddle, ah! And WHAT do you think he was a-playin' ah!'

"'He was a-playin' that good old tune, Hah! A'nt Jenny Get Your Hoecake Done; Hah! A'nt Jenny Get Your Hoecake Done!"

There was a general laugh at this, and encouraged, Peter Rhodes went on.

"At another time he was preaching on doctrine. He said, 'You can be saved in the Methodists, and you can be saved in the Baptists, ah! You can be saved in the Presbyterians, and you might be saved in the Advents, ah!"

The silence following this was short. Anne Rhodes, delighted to be out again, reacting from the confinement of months, was giving herself unreservedly to the enjoyment of the hour.

"There was a boy back home who was considered pretty smart," she began. And at this reference Peter Rhodes scowled. "His name was Jay; he used to come to see me," she explained, explaining also her husband's scowl.

"Once as he was going home, he saw something—a ghost, he said it was. And when he got home he told what he had done to it. He blew about it so much that somebody"—she looked down at the fire as she referred to this somebody—"made a little poem about him."

"What was it?" Peter Rhodes asked breathlessly. This was an angle from which Anne Rhodes had never discussed the individual named Jay in his presence before.

"It was something like this:

Poor Jay, poor Jay, as he did say, He saw a monster on the way. It was so tall, it looked so high It seemed right there poor Jay must die.

The night, it seems, was very dark: He could not see a single spark; This monster, rising like a sail, Caught his bay mare right by the tail.

Then said poor Jay, 'To save my life I'll cut you with my pocket knife!' And quelling all his bitter fears He caught the monster by the ears.

And him he held and threw his coat, And caught the monster by the throat.

The Camp at Black Mountain

Then jumping up he gave a cry And at the monster fierce did fly.

His licks were fast and quick they flew, And every one went through and through: For this dread monster he did find Was but a figment of his mind!"

"And you wrote that?" Peter Rhodes asked delightedly. Perhaps this fellow had not ranked so high, after all.

"I didn't say so."

"But if he couldn't see a single spark, how could he see the thing rise up like a sail?" Ben wanted to know.

"That's what none of us could understand," his mother told him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Peter Rhodes, feeling better than he had in years.

Again silence fell, this time of long duration. Emotion changed. From a crumbling cliff on the mountain to the north came the long-drawn woman-scream of a catamount; and hearing it the dog from the little house barked challenge. Somewhere below them on Black Mountain a hoot owl mouthed his hoarse who-who who-who who-who who-who ho who-who ho

There was a whir near the campfire, an interval, and the intermittent staccato of the screech owl. The dog across the valley barked more stridently: something was creeping down from the cliff.

The fire threw a ruddy glow that was caught by the straight bowls of the surrounding trees, causing them to look like painted Indians hovering for attack, and throwing dark shadows through the forest.

The catamount cried again, this time far down.

"Talking about ghosts," Peter Rhodes began musingly,

"makes me think of the two Wilson boys that came up here after chestnuts, years ago."

He stopped for a moment, eyes on the fire, as if recalling each detail of the experience he had in mind. He reached over and gave a chunk a twist that settled it more squarely on the fire. It fell on the red coals and sent myriads of sparks high into the air.

"It was back years ago," he went on, "when hunters found bears in these parts and when panthers were numerous. The Wilson boys came up here after chestnuts."

"Let me see, what were their names?" Anne Rhodes asked, trying to recall.

"Frank and Tom. Frank was older. Well, well, well, poor boys! They came up for chestnuts, but they wandered around too much and got lost. You can get lost out there," waving his hand toward the silent brooding forest, "and they found it out. Get down in there so you can't see out, and you begin to walk round in a circle."

"That's because one leg is shorter than the other," Henry interrupted to say. Jennie glanced at him with wonder in her eyes, which was what he had desired.

"So I have heard. The long leg gets round quicker and throws you in a circle. That's how it was with Frank and Tom. They got to going round and round.

"I guess it must be a pretty creepy feeling to be trapped in a place as big as a wilderness, to walk fast in order to get out before dark, and then come back where you started from. Tom was not more than fifteen, and Frank was only about eighteen.

"Tom tried to keep up, but when it began to get dark he got scared. The woods became still, the sun went down and made it feel as if all the light warm things had gone with it and left only gloom behind. You know the feeling?

"The boys had left their guns up here." Ben caught his breath at this. Lost in a wilderness at night, and without a gun! "They had heard of bears and panthers, and that they usually begin to prowl about at night.

"Tom asked Frank what he thought about it, and Frank said there was no danger. He said there were no painters any more. He called the panthers painters.

"Then it got dark. It is always darker in the woods, because they help to shut out light from the stars. The boys didn't try to walk any more. They were too tired and hungry; so they sat down to rest and figure out what they ought to do.

"They were sitting on a log under a big beech, talking. Then they stopped, for they had heard something. There was a funny sound, a kind of pat-pat, pat-pat, somewhere above them. They looked. On a big outstretching limb of the beech they saw two yellow slits of flame.

"It was a painter. It had stalked them and climbed into the tree. The pat-pat was its tail on the limb. They do that just before they spring. And that was the only noise this one made, just that pat-pat pat-pat, while it bunched its muscles and got ready.

"Frank was a cool one, though. He struck a match and the flare frightened the thing away. Then the boys built a fire, so as to keep all night prowlers at a distance."

The catamount over on the hill to the north interrupted here. It was creeping down. The dog at the little house was now whining and barking madly.

"That's a good dog, all right."

"Poor fellow!" Arthur Evans said. "He's faithful, but he would have no chance with that thing."

"Well, well, well. The boys built a fire and it kept the painters at bay. But they got sleepy. Frank told Tom he would keep the fire going, so Tom lay down on a bed of leaves to sleep. For what seemed to him an age, Frank sat there trying to hold his eyes open and replenishing the fire.

"But he had ridden all morning and tramped about all afternoon. He was desperately tired: he dozed off. And while he dozed the fire went down. As it died down, the painters slipped up.

"They made no noise. Crawling with their bellies low, they got closer and closer, yellow eyes narrow perpendicular slits of flame. I have seen them come up that way," he burst out. "Their legs are bent directly under them, and their tails drag low behind. They stick out their noses until—they are ready. But one thing, they give a warning, like a rattler.

"Something roused Frank. He opened his eyes to see the yellow ones circling him in the darkness. There was no sound; just a circle of eyes, like a string of yellow beads.

"But as I say, Frank was a cool one. Quick as a flash he seized a chunk from the embers and hurled it among them. There was a quick, hasty scramble, and the painters retreated behind the darkness."

The dog had roused its master in the house on the neighboring mountain; and the catamount, understanding, cried out its baffled rage and retreated.

"Did the boys have horses?" Ben asked breathlessly.

"Yes. They were tied up here, just like ours."

"Go on. Tell the rest of it."

"Well, they kept watch all night, and the next day

The Camp at Black Mountain

255

tried to find their way out. But they got so tired and hungry they lay down in a big bed of leaves and slept. They got cold and awoke: it was getting dark again."

Here he stopped, sitting hunched forward and looking into the fire. Clearly, he was thinking, considering something he had often observed. The others were watching him.

"Funny," he mused at last, "how you are often so near and just don't know it. The boys had circled round until they were near this very place, but they did not know it. They heard their horses!" He shuddered.

"Heard their horses?"

"The painters had found their horses, and soon learned that they were tied and helpless: they were at the mercy of the beasts, tied there so they could not get free.

"Their whinnies told the boys where they were and what was happening.... They ran toward them.... But for one, they were too late...."

"Had they killed him?"

"Don't!" Anne Rhodes pleaded.

"But did the boys get away all right?"

"The next day."

"Peter Rhodes! Why did you tell us such a thing to-night," his wife reproached him. "I am scared to death." She looked nervously about her.

"There is no danger now," he laughed. . . .

Morning came. Off in the east a pale silver streaked the sky, was followed by a purple cloud that stretched up like the back of a camel. Then came streaks of crimson and soon the red sun looked through the trunks of the straight trees of the eastern hills as a rosy-faced baby might peep through the grating of his crib.

The sleepers awoke.

The fire was replenished and breakfast put on.

"Be sure to put in the essence, Anne," Peter Rhodes cautioned his wife as she went toward the fire with the coffee-pot.

The essence was put in, the bacon and eggs were fried and eaten with relish. The horses were fed and watered and brought back and saddled. The meal sack was put over Henry's saddle like a grist to be taken to the mill.

Anne Rhodes donned her riding-skirt and got on Bird; Ben took his place behind his father on old Bill, and the party was ready for the return.

Away down there in the southwest was Barren Rocks. But between them and it stretched the road, and now it was a way that none of them dreaded.

Chapter 13

BLACK ART

WINTER came, and the limbs of the trees hung heavy with snow or bent low with the cold, driving rains. Elk river turned muddy with the first storms, cleared as it grew colder and finally froze from bank to bank. On the ice's polished surface, Barren Rocks held carnival.

Little Creek froze up, and Ben with others went far up beyond the schoolhouse and tapped the ice over hornyheads and redfins that lay on the bottom beneath, then waited for them to float to the open shoals and carried them home for breakfast.

Rabbits were tracked in the snow, two tracks before and one behind, were located in holes and there trapped with rabbit-boxes fashioned cleverly.

Steel traps and deadfalls were set at inviting places over the hills and by river and streams, if perchance a venturesome muskrat or mink or a careless fox or a stolid opossum or a frisky skunk might get entangled and furnish pelt for market.

Peter Rhodes was anxious about his revivals. One he held at the River appointment and another at the Mills, both of which resulted in many coming forward. But he was uncertain about Barren Rocks.

"Anne," he asked her, "do you think we had better try protracted meetings here this winter?"

"And why not?" she asked, accepting the annual big meeting as an event as fixed as Christmas.

"Well," he answered dubiously. "I hear that Brother Engle is to come back in the spring, and I kind of wanted him to be with us for our next big meeting."

"Is he coming back?" she asked delightedly.

"So they say."

"I tell you, we might put it off. If he were with us we might get more mourners."

Finally it was decided so. Stephen Engle was a famous singer and helper in revivals. His son was a minister in Georgia who had persuaded his father to leave Barren Rocks and live with him.

But the arrangement had not satisfied the old man. Barren Rocks had been his home from childhood, and he fretted at the newness of his son's community; fretted also at his lack of freedom in the household; and at last had decided to return to his old home, come spring.

Not the least of the forces that had determined his decision was a letter from Peter Rhodes, in which he told the old man that he was most grievously missed from the church at Barren Rocks. This pleased Stephen Engle: he wanted to be missed!

"With him here," Peter Rhodes replied to his wife, "we can do a great work."

"How he can sing!"

"He can sing conviction into sinners' hearts!"

So no protracted meeting was held that winter at Barren Rocks. There was some murmuring at first, but when the people heard the reason they were content: Put the revival off until Stephen Engle should return, and what with his singing and his "raging" a mighty ingathering would follow.

Winter went on. Roads froze hard; light, cold snow

blown from them in places revealed the red ribs of clay and the horse tracks beneath. The sun drew far away to the south, and when clouds permitted it to shine, gave forth but a feeble heat.

Henry was teaching the Barren Rocks school, and of a morning would go forth in his heavy coat and mittens, cross through the bars and down the hill, going finally up to the old schoolhouse where the old cracked Burnside stove glowed red-hot and was surrounded by a group of jostling scholars, standing about to dry. The steam from their wet boots and stockings rose and filled the room.

Then there was a change. Winter broke. The weather was no longer constant, but was cold and moderate by turns. The sun came back, trees in the woods began to pop and thaw out. March winds blew, and here and there on sunny south slopes the earth looked warm.

With spring coming on and the end of school in sight, Henry became increasingly restless. His was a nature inhospitable to the monotonous, inimical to the conventional. He wanted to be prowling about doing the unusual thing.

It was just at this time, when he was fallow soil for any suggestion, that he became interested in a new and wonderful thing. He saw an advertisement in Sunshine, a paper which came regularly to the Manse at a subscription rate of ten cents a year, to the effect that Professor J. J. Sharadon, of Lansing, Michigan, would for the sum of five dollars teach any man the mysterious art of hypnotism.

The thing gripped Henry. His wayward unconventional nature was stirred by it. He wrote to Professor Sharadon for further information and received the same by return mail.

According to this information, quite marvelous things could be done by the hypnotist: he could wriggle his fingers in front of an astounded individual and put him instantly to sleep; he might hypnotize a postal card, send it through the mail and the mere perusal of its contents would put the recipient completely under his control; he could, if he so desired, plumb the depths of the mind and read the thoughts, for example, of any young lady friend.

More than this: There was money in hypnotism. The skilled performer could give exhibitions around over the country, traveling at leisure, doing easy work, and making an incredible amount of money.

Professor Sharadon's course would cover every detail. Full instructions covering each phase of the art were given, some postal cards were sent along, and a marvelously designed diploma wrought in colors was sent along with the lessons to prove to the world that the holder was an expert. A miniature copy of this diploma, with name space ruled out, was sent along with the letter of information to show the inquirer just what he might expect.

Henry read every word of the information. He read it the second time. He even wrote his name in the ruled-out space on the diploma to see how it should look there.

He took Ben into his confidence. "You see, Ben, with this thing we can do practically as we please."

"Could you put me to sleep?"

"Sure. Like that!" He merely waved his hands in front of Ben to show with what ease the thing could be done. "And we could make a lot of money, too."

Henry was taken with the thought of wandering leisurely about over the country, living the life of a

tramp as regards freedom to roam at will, but having pockets full of money to spend at pleasure.

He took five dollars of his salary and became a student of Professor Sharadon. Again by return mail he received full instructions, a diploma made out to himself, and the congratulations of Professor Sharadon himself. The great hypnotist wished him success.

Henry looked at the diploma by the hour, marveling at his sudden skill in this new art. And avidly he read the lessons in hypnotism. First he learned how to hypnotize by mail and forthwith sent Charlie Snowden a card. Then he learned the general art, how by holding a bright object in front and a little above a subject's eyes and speaking monotonously for a moment, he could put him to sleep.

He tried this out on Ben. Holding the polished end of his barlow knife just in front and above his eyes he spoke to him in soft tones, informing him that soon he should sleep, sleep peacefully, sleep, sleep without a dream, that he should rest, rest untroubled.

With his free hand he stroked Ben's temples according to the suggestion of the instructions. But Ben got ashamed of sitting solemnly there with Henry performing on him, and he laughed.

"Why, Ben," Henry reproved grievedly. "I was just ready to tell you to shut your eyes and declare you asleep."

"But I thought you just had to wave your fingers at me."

"That is one way," Henry replied with dignity. "But not the only one. I use one method with one subject and another with another."

During the remainder of his school term, Henry studied the instructions, and at last felt that he qualified

as an expert. To a degree he neglected preparations for the last day of school, so eager was he to be proficient in the new art.

But the last day passed creditably. Children said their pieces, Anne Rhodes sang a song, there were contests on the playground, the big dinner out of doors, and Henry was free to begin his career as a hypnotist.

While Anne Rhodes looked worried and her husband smiled, Henry laid his plans. Ben should be an advance agent, going on ahead with posters which Henry fashioned, and announcing the performance in advance. Henry knew he should have no difficulty getting a building for his exhibitions: free admission for the trustees and their families would open the schoolhouses to him.

Bill Hunter was to belong to the party, taking the rôle of volunteer subject. At the beginning of the performance, the lessons stated, it would be well for Henry to speak briefly on the wonderful art of hypnotism, informing the people what could already be done by it and what might be expected of it in the future.

This done, he was to call for volunteer subjects from the audience. But a wise provision was made: it would be well for the hypnotist to have a subject ready to come forward from the audience at this period. Otherwise, awed by the new art, the audience might shrink from giving itself to the experiment.

Bill Hunter was to act in this capacity. He was active. He could turn a handspring, could lie with feet on one chair and head on another and bear a considerable weight on his abdomen, he could hang by his toes in a wonderful manner, and spring about like a dog.

Around him Henry built up his repertoire. Ben was dispatched seven miles across country to arrange for the

first performance at Treenor Ridge, and the die was cast.

It was warm spring as Ben trudged over to Treenor Ridge. The schoolhouse where it was desired to give the first performance was a log affair, standing high on the ridge in a grove. There were no houses near it; a half mile away Ben located the first trustee.

"What is hit ye want the house fer?" he asked shrewdly. He was now about to enjoy a perquisite of his office.

"I am representing Professor Treevallingham of the American Hypnotic Bureau," Ben informed him. Henry's instructions had advised some such nomenclature.

"Yes?" the man encouraged. This was as he would have it.

"He wants to give an entertainment at the schoolhouse Friday night, and we want to know if you will let us have the house."

"Uum-huh," he replied, pulling his beard reflectively.
"Uum-huh. I'd like to do hit, but I cain't, I reckon."

"You can't!" Ben was alarmed at this refusal.

"I reckon not. Too many things bein' held there now. They're ruinin' the buildin'."

"We could give you and your family tickets, of course," Ben said, bethinking himself. Henry had warned him of just such a situation.

"You mean tickets to git in on?" he asked innocently. "Yes. Like these." Ben exhibited a number.

The man got possession of several, ostensibly to examine them at closer range. He turned them over and over, slipped two of them up his sleeve and returned the others. "Think I could git six?" he asked.

Singing Mountains

264

"Six for your family," Ben answered, handing the number to him.

"I reckon this here Treevallingham has a livin' to make, jest like the rest of us, eh?" he said with a prolonged wink. "I guess he kin have the buildin'."

Ben secured consent of all the other trustees after insuring their free admission, posted the bills with which Henry had supplied him, and moved on. He was not to tarry till the performance, but to keep always a few days in advance to advertise the exhibitions.

The circuit which had been arranged went first south, then turned southwest, and finally making an arch toward the north, brought up on Elk river near Wilson. It was at the Wilson schoolhouse that the final performance was to be given; because, as Henry had pointed out, from Wilson the party could go back to Barren Rocks in a boat or on a raft.

Wade Davis lived five miles below and north of Wilson. A conversation that took place in the bosom of his family not long before Professor Treevallingham was scheduled to appear in the Wilson schoolhouse, has bearing here.

Jennie was again visiting her uncle, and now sat near the lamp in whose light he was reading. Hazel was beside her, eager to have her tell of her wonderful romance with the Barren Rocks school teacher. Hazel knew that his name was Henry, knew he was tall and wonderfully handsome and that he was the epitome of fine generosity. She understood also that he had piercing blue eyes, brown hair and very soft, white hands.

She had information even more intimate. She knew that Henry could throw his thumb out of joint in a funny way, that he could mimic Nathan Mallory so that it just tickled you to death, and that he could get you

started to laughing in church or somewhere and be perfectly sober himself.

But Hazel hungered for more. Romance had up to this time passed her by, though of course not for long. Consequently she wanted Jennie to tell her more about this wonderful man.

"Come for a little walk," she suggested coaxingly.

"In a minute," Jennie temporized.

Here Wade Davis put down the copy of the weekly paper he had been perusing and spoke. "I was up at Wilson to-day and heard something. There is a Professor Treevallingham of the American Hypnotic Bureau going to give an exhibition up there."

"O goody!" Hazel cried, clapping her hands. "Can we go?"

"He must be a wonderful man," Wade Davis went on seriously. "It says he can do lots of things. This hypnotism is a great thing. It says on the bills he can put you to sleep through the mails."

"Ooooh!" Jennie shuddered, frightened at the awful possibilities of such a power.

"Does he show you how to do it?" his wife asked.

"He does it right on the stage. Just calls a man out and hypnotizes him right before everybody."

"Will you go?" Jennie asked, trying to keep down her excitement.

"What do you say, Hazel?" he asked with a laugh.

"Yes, yes!"

The unpredictable Henry had kept his researches in black art carefully concealed from Jennie. Times without number, bursting with the importance of the subject, he had been on the point of telling her all. But he had refrained. She was therefore innocent as a babe in arms that her own Henry was the great Professor Treevallingham.

Some information concerning Professor Treevallingham had seeped on ahead. It was said he was a rather striking looking man, tall with a slight stoop, wearing a crisp black moustache and having excessively baffling eyes.

There were some rather breathless rumors as to the wonders he could perform. At one point he had cured a sick man by a wave of the hand; again he had stricken dumb a man who had essayed to break up one of his performances; and once he restored sight to a blind man.

But there was another side to his reputation. He had his supporters; there were also those who berated him. They said he was a fake. This was their favorite word, fake. He was, they said, but a fake who was going about taking people's money.

It was the usual rumor; just enough for and against to cause every man to decide that he had better go to this Professor Treevallingham's entertainment to satisfy himself as to which side he should take.

Jennie and Hazel heard it all.

"What do you think of it!" Jennie gasped. "To do all those wonderful things!"

"To heal a blind man," Hazel echoed reverently.

"I think he must be a good man," Jennie went on.
"A fake couldn't do such things."

"I am crazy to see him."

"So am I."

They were not the only ones interested. There were a number who wanted to believe in Professor Treevallingham, a number who looked forward to the per-

formance as a time when their contentions as to the reality of spiritual powers should be upheld.

But there were others, leader of whom was Zad Humphry, who declared feelingly that the man was an impostor. They openly scoffed at his claims and challenged his accomplishments. With Zad were two other ringleaders, Warner Connor and Bob Fitch.

Zad was a big fellow with a round mouth and deep chest, whose black hair stood up in a crinkled pompadour and who was given to loud-voiced asseverations.

"A fake, a fake," he boomed, using the favorite designation of the unbelievers. "I'd like to see him hypnotize me!"

Warn Connor seconded him in this wish, declaring at the same time that it couldn't be done. "But I can put him to sleep," he ended insinuatingly, examining the knuckles of his right hand.

Bob Fitch was short but stocky. He was also redheaded and very pugnacious. "When he calls for volunteers, I'm goin' up," he declared ominously.

From all which it may be inferred that Professor Treevallingham was to have rough sledding for his exhibition at Wilson. This was, indeed, the very condition he had feared from the first, but from which so far he had been graciously spared.

The Wilson schoolhouse was not unlike all the others. It was of logs, with benches inside and a painted wall for a blackboard. For evening use the building was equipped with lamps, fastened to the walls and backed by large glass reflectors.

Professor Treevallingham arrived at Wilson early in the afternoon, and the curious came to have a look at him. But his instructions from Professor J. J. Sharadon had been not to make himself too conspicuous before an appointment. In short, he had counselled his students to keep in the dark and for two reasons: receipts of the evening would be greater if people had not got to look the performer over, and the belief in his hypnotic powers would be more spontaneous if he had not allowed himself to become too common.

Accordingly on reaching Wilson Henry had tarried only long enough to get a square meal. He then went down to the river, lit a pipe for which even then he was beginning to show a fondness that should characterize his later years, and lay down in the shade of a tree.

The gnats annoyed him somewhat, but otherwise he was undisturbed, and he was content to lie in peace. The new life suited him. No work, an evening's excitement, and long beautiful days when he could lie around and smoke!

Bill Hunter was acting his role at this time. He was mingling with the loafers of Wilson, passing himself off as a stranger from Treenor Ridge where Henry had given his first performance.

He was now telling the loafers that he had watched this Professor at his first performance, and then had followed him around from place to place trying to find him out.

He could actually hypnotize people, then? You bet he could, but not him! No one could hypnotize old Bill Hunter, and to prove it he was going to go up on the platform to-night and let the fellow perform on him.

"You goin' up an' let him work on ye?" an auditor repeated.

"You're dam' right. He can't git me. Not me!"

"But what if he did?" the auditor persisted in a kind of grisly hope.

"You wait till he does!" Bill scoffed.

The auditor here got up and walked quickly up the

road. He reached the home of Timothy Nottingham, a trustee of the Wilson school, and called out a hello. Timothy himself came out.

"Tim," the man addressed him, lowering his voice, "you got any tickets to this here thing to-night?"

"Only for me and my fambly," Timothy answered coldly.

"Thought ye might want a hand to help in yore corn next week. Ye ain't laid 'er by."

"You goin' to be workin' out some?"

"I might. They say this here Professor Treevallingham is right smart piert."

Timothy Nottingham turned and entered the house, returning after a moment with a small piece of pasteboard which he handed to the man. "You be around Wednesday, maybe?" he asked.

"Guess so." The man turned and walked back down to the store.

Evening came, and in the gathering dusk the lightning bugs swung here and there in soft arches on the river bottom. The slight chill of evening began to settle down over the earth.

Bill Hunter found Professor Treevallingham down by the river, and roused him to the fact that it should soon be time for the evening's entertainment.

"Think we will have a crowd, Bill?"

"Crowd!" And Bill danced about in his glee. This in very truth was easy money for him: a dollar a day with his board, and practically no work! "A crowd; why, she'll be crammed."

"Sure?" Henry smiled languidly. This was a great life! But he sat up suddenly. "Bill," he asked seriously, "is there a boat handy we could get to go down in?"

"You mean to go back home in?"

"Yes."

"Sure. One right over there."

A little way up the river Zad Humphry crooked his finger to signal to him Warn and Bob, and catching their attention, drew down his brows and nodded twice. "You got me?" he asked.

"We got you," they chorused.

Wade Davis arrived at the school house and with him Hazel looking almost frightened at thought of the mysteries she was about to witness, and Jennie who appeared very eager to see all yet calm enough to be mindful of the admiring glances that followed her.

Within all was ready. The house was packed, conspicuous among the crowd being the trustees with their families. The walls were lined with young men, some even sitting in the raised windows.

Up front was a small stage where the teacher's desk stood during school days, but where now there was a suggestive absence of furnishings, the only pieces being two plain chairs. These chairs were doubtless the ones across which the great magician should break men.

Back in the rear to the right of the door and standing with backs against the wall in skeptical attitude were Zad and Warn and Bob, determined not to miss a single item of the entertainment, but just as determined to prevent any fraud. For the present they had appointed themselves the guardians of the credulous citizens of Wilson.

About midway up and to the left, Wade Davis and his party had found a seat and were quietly awaiting the entrance of the great man.

There was a sudden hush, an air of expectancy. Professor Treevallingham stood in the doorway. He glanced at the crowded room and advanced down the aisle.

He was slightly stooped, his moustache was sharply waxed, he was wearing a long black coat of the Prince Albert design. When he reached the little stage he turned and faced the audience.

There was indeed something wild about his eyes. They were blue, but with unusually large balls, and around the blue irises the whites glowed with a strange opalescence hinting of mysterious power. At very sight of them some in the audience gasped. Even Zad Humphry was momentarily taken aback.

Ben sat humped on the front bench, half terrified lest Henry should fail to make good on this important occasion. But at sight of him, especially of his white eyes, his fear vanished and all his old admiration returned. Henry fail? Shucks!

Professor Treevallingham delivered with telling effect a speech that had been prepared by his great preceptor, a speech concerned with rendering plausible the possibilities of hypnotism. Hypnotism, so the speech declared, was not a new art: the old Hindoos had practised it in their wild magic, the great of the Orient had long made it their servant, and now it was brought to this country.

What had been a black art was now become a science. It should prove to be the great boon of the future. By it criminals should be convicted, deception detected and the sick healed.

The climax came when having dwelt on the power of the new art, Professor Treevallingham invited anyone from the audience who doubted his hypnotic capacity to come forward and be hypnotized before the very eyes of all. There followed a terrible silence. The audience sat agape, some looking stunned, others terrified and all just a little wary of this mysterious power that stood there personified before them. In best dramatic pose, Henry stood erect, one hand extended in invitation, white eyes sweeping the audience.

When he had first faced about on the stage Jennie's eyes had widened. When he spoke she caught her breath and looked dazedly about her. Then she bent puzzled eyes upon him in an effort to fathom the mystery.

The figure was Henry's, and the hair. No one she knew parted his hair like that but Henry. The eyes were wider than his usually were, more of the whites showing. But the voice! It certainly sounded like his. But the moustache, and hypnotism. . . .

Henry was at Barren Rocks! She knew it. And he was not a hypnotist. As if he would take up with such a thing without telling her all about it!

The silence was broken by a movement in the rear. Bill Hunter was starting up the aisle to make good his declared intention to show this impostor up.

"Let me go," he growled. "He's a fake. He can't put me to sleep. I'll show him up!"

"Go to it," Zad Humphry encouraged, delighting in this unexpected support.

Bill stalked up the aisle. He passed the seat where Jennie sat, and sight of him confirmed her deepening fears. It was Henry! This was Bill Hunter and there—she saw Ben at this moment. He had turned in his seat to see who this rowdy might be.

The audience held its breath. Bill Hunter walked right up to the great man and glowered at him defiantly. But Henry brought his hand up before Bill's face with a quick gesture.

Bill took a step backward as if tapped on the head with a hammer. Then Henry shut his mouth firmly, opened his eyes still wider and bent down to stare into Bill's face, eyeballs glowing close.

The effect was almost immediate. Bill stiffened, grasped at his throat as if gasping for breath. Then his hands dropped to his sides, his body drooped and a moment later he was limp on the floor.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," Henry chanted solemnly, "is the art of hypnotism. But I have not finished. For your entertainment I shall have the subject perform."

The ruse had been cleverly staged. The audience had taken Bill Hunter for what he had claimed to be, a stranger among them, a man from Treenor Ridge who was skeptical of the whole business and bent on exposing the fraud.

Zad Humphry looked uncertainly at his companions; they avoided his glance.

Wade Davis seemed undecided. He turned to his wife, only to find her eyes on him. Both glanced at Jennie who had shrunk to the smallest possible size and was looking with a kind of dumb horror at the scene in front of her.

"Arise," Henry commanded pompously.

Bill got uncertainly to his feet.

"This," said Henry, placing a wicked looking knife in Bill's hand, "is a dagger. You are to stab yourself through the heart with it."

Quickly Bill poised the dagger. The blade hung for an instant, reflecting on its polished surface the light from many lamps. Many in the audience screamed. There were cries of "don't, don't!"

But as the hand was poised to drive the dagger home,

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Henry caught it firmly in his own. "There is no danger, ladies and gentlemen," he said easily. "I shall not allow the subject to harm himself."

After the sigh of relief that followed, he continued. "There was a hypnotist once, a friend of mine, who tried this little experiment. He gave the subject a dagger and the command to stab himself. Of course he meant to stop him, just as I have done. But," he said with a rather sad smile, "he wasn't quick enough; he missed catching the hand." Here he exposed his palms and shrugged, as if leaving the outcome to imagination.

Professor Sharadon, with delightful frankness, had suggested both the initial experiment and the little story. It would, he declared, expedite matters by keeping away those who were not really interested in the high art of hypnotism but were faultfinders seeking to trouble and disturb.

Bill was stretched with heels on one chair and head on another, and Henry sat down on his stomach. This was to illustrate the rigidity induced by the hypnotic state. He turned a handspring, jumped about like a dog; he gave a speech that made him appear ridiculous, got down and turned a somersault, and stood on his head.

"I guess that is enough for him," Henry said with a tolerant smile. "I read his thoughts, that he did not believe in my power, and I wanted to humble him. And," he continued impressively, "I am reading the thoughts of others in this room. They don't believe. I will now wake this man and give them their chance."

At previous entertainments there had been no response to his second call. He had had his audience cowed; men were afraid he might miss their hands in the dagger experiment. Of course it was a fake, but why run any risk with it? Henry consequently had awakened Bill, had stood a moment waiting for other volunteers, had then recalled Bill seemingly against his will for another demonstration, and declared the exhibition closed.

But not so this time. Bob Fitch, his face appearing almost pale below his red hair, looked at his companions for moral support, disengaged himself from their company and strode forward.

"Go to it, Bob. We're back of you!" growled Zad behind him.

Henry observed the stocky red-headed and bellicose young man coming toward him. He heard the growl and understood its meaning. His heart beat fast; he looked quickly over the room as if calculating means of escape. And his glance rested on Jennie. Heretofore, having either been intent on Bill or endeavoring to make his eyes stare wildly, he had not seen her. The cold glance he surprised on her face staggered him.

As his eyes rested for an instant on her, she elevated her own. He paled. Was it Jennie? How on earth had she got to Wilson? Dimly he sensed the eyes of the audience upon him. Bob's voice further recalled him.

"Ain't you goin' to do me?" he demanded sourly.

Henry pulled himself together. Bringing his hand up quickly in front of Bob's face, he put his face close and looked him intently in the eyes.

"Haw," Bob laughed scoffingly.

"Sleep, sleep," Henry chanted.

"Hold 'im, Bob," came from Zad in the rear.

"Sleep, sleep," Henry continued.

"Haw," Bob scoffed again.

"Fake!" Warn called out.

"Put him out," Zad suggested.

"Give us our money back."

Here Bob turned to the audience, his face flushed with

triumph. Then he faced Henry. "Put me to sleep," he challenged.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Henry began, trying to make himself heard above the growing hubbub, "there are some people who cannot be hypnotized." His authority for this statement was none other than Professor Sharadon himself. "They are the scoffers, those who——"

"But I thought you could hypnotize by mail!"

"And heal the sick."

"But---"

"And the blind."

"I see a man back there who is sick," Henry interrupted dramatically. "I will show you. I will bring that man up here and heal him so you can see that what I say is true."

The audience was silenced.

"Give me a hand, here," Henry requested.

Ben and Bill, prepared for such an eventuality, arose to give him a hand. The three went to the back of the room, all eyes fixed upon them. But when Henry passed Jennie's seat he did not look toward her.

"There he is," he cried, pointing to the right corner. "There is the man."

All eyes turned to the right corner. Henry, Ben and Bill stepped through the door and took to their heels. They reached the landing, untied the boat, got in and gave it a great shove. Followed the splash of a paddle. . . .

"Are they coming, boys?"

"Not yet."

"But Henry, why didn't you---"

"Shut up!"

Jennie was leaving the schoolhouse with bowed head. Hazel, clinging to her arm, was talking excitedly.

"Think, Jen. He was a fake! O, I am so mad."

Black Art

277

"Wasn't that fellow——" Wade Davis began, but Jennie of a sudden found her voice.

"Can't we go home now?" she asked nervously.

"O, I am so mad. The old fake!" And Hazel, doubling up her small soft fist shook it angrily. "The old fake!"

Chapter 14

THE SMOKY OPAL

I T was Saturday afternoon of the fifteenth day of June. Peter Rhodes had gone to his appointment, riding off alone while Anne Rhodes sat by the open door and watched him until he disappeared down below the lower bars.

There was a little patch up on the hill above the house to be cleared off, and their father had assigned to Ben and Henry a small portion of this patch as the area which they should grub up while he was away.

It was hot. Henry sat astride a stubby hickory sprout, bending it over and with his mattock digging down round the straight tough root. He had, to judge from the expression of his face, about reached the end of his patience.

Ben was following a wayward sumac root that forked just under the ground and ran one in one direction, the other in a second. He likewise was far from placid.

"I don't like to smell these sumac roots," he said disgustedly. "And this gummy stuff that runs out of them makes me sick."

"I wouldn't mind anything if I could follow the root along on top the ground," Henry replied irritably. "The trouble comes when you have to dig straight down on a hickory."

Ben waited a little before replying. He glanced down toward the bars and noted with relief that his father was

out of sight. Then he scrutinized a great greenbrier that wound up a sassafras tree like a grapevine.

"They say, Hen," he began, leaning on his hoe, "that if you let that greenbrier root get good and dry it makes a fine pipe."

"Who say?" Henry answered shortly. He was skeptical. Not only was he tired of work; he had once dug up a greenbrier root, pared the large lump he found on it into a smooth bowl, and hollowed out what promised to be a wonderful pipe, only to discover that it burned along with the tobacco when he essayed to smoke it.

"But you didn't do it right," Ben said, reading Henry's mind. He was familiar with the circumstance. "You did the thing wrong. Why did you——"

"Why did you nothing!" With a hard blow of the mattock he severed the hickory root and threw the ungainly sprout up on the brush heap. He sat down. "Ben, what do you suppose Jennie thought?" he asked irrelevantly.

"She looked mad."

"It was going all right. I was holding my audience," Henry went on, the fire of the entertainer coming into his eyes. "I had those old fellows going."

"I don't look for her to make up with you. Women are funny about things like that."

Henry drooped at this. He had been entertaining similar thoughts. "I can at least go over and see."

"You can go over to-morrow."

"I am going now."

"But this patch---"

"Can go for all of me."

He threw down the mattock. Ben wavered. Obedience was a quality of him; besides he had a fixed terror of his father in anger: he would have gone ahead

and cleared off the patch. But as ever Henry was disregardful of authority: he never seemed frightened at thought of consequences of disobedience. He now went to the house and got ready to go to see Jennie.

As for Jennie herself, she had reacted rather violently to the experience at the entertainment. So undignified had Henry appeared at the close of the performance, and so blasé was his disappearance that she made every effort to conceal his identity from Hazel.

She was certain that both Wade Davis and his wife knew Henry, and her heart turned over every time either of them began to speak on the way home. But while they discussed the entertainment and bitterly denounced the fake hypnotist, they did not once reveal his identity. She began to hope they had not recognized him.

It was on her way back to Barren Rocks that she blocked out a course of behavior which she considered suited to the situation. She should not actually break with Henry; she should not even upbraid him beyond a certain point. The proper thing should be to show him how hurt she was that he should place her in a position of that kind.

Thought of this attitude pleased her. She dwelt in detail upon Henry's appearance and manner when he should come to her; her anticipations gave her keen delight.

Before she reached home she was glad he had given her this occasion to act coolly towards him: it was really wonderful, this thing of falling out and making all up again.

She was still in this frame of mind when Henry arrived. He was looking very sober and uncertain, yet she could not help thinking how handsome he was as he

walked up the path. She was watching him from an unseen point of vantage.

Old Buck had been sold, so Henry walked nonchalantly past the old orchard lot. In glancing about him he beheld a cherry tree filled with ripe fruit. It was impossible for him to pass a tree of that nature. He had been known to steal from the meeting house while his father preached and plunder the cherry trees of the neighborhood.

He looked rather guiltily about him to see whether he might be observed, and making sure he was not, slipped into the orchard and proceeded to help himself.

Jennie saw and smiled. She was glad Henry was always hungry. On occasions she had cooked for him, and always he had eaten everything with a great and pleasing relish. This delighted her, although she had never stopped to reason why.

She decided to let him stay in the cherry tree until he had had all he wanted, but he stayed too long. With naïve girlishness she strolled out the door and down toward the orchard.

She was almost upon him ere she discovered his presence. Then she sprang back prettily, making a picture of unusual beauty as she arched her slim white neck and opened her lips to cry out.

"Are you here?" she exclaimed.

Henry got down heavily and advanced, uncertainty and penitence showing in his every movement. "I came over to see you," he said.

"O, did you?" she replied, with the faintest trace of hauteur. She did not mean to give up the scene she had anticipated.

"Jennie, don't be mad at me."

"So you have taken a day off from your hypnotic trip?" There was acid in her tone now.

"Honest, Jennie---"

"You must be quite a hypnotist," she went on.

"Don't, Jennie. We were just having a little fun and they thought we meant it."

"It was funny to charge admission."

"We had to have something to live on. But we are done with it now."

"Until you start out again. I never knew you had taken it up," and here she uncovered the true cause of her anger. "They say you can hypnotize people by mail." Her teeth flashed in a cold smile.

"That was just a joke. The boys all knew it."

"But you said at the beginning it was true."

He beheld before him a strange woman. In a sense he had always felt himself her master: even his sulky spells had often been simulated in order to bring him the luxury of an apology from her. But now she stood before him in cold disdain; it seemed to him she did not care for him even in the least.

As for her, she was wondering how much further she dare go!

"Forgive me," he asked suddenly and contritely.

She had not expected his collapse so soon. It was too soon: she felt she had not extracted the utmost from the situation. She hesitated.

"How do you think I felt," she began, "when you came in there and started that! You should have heard the people talk after you ran away."

"What did they say?" A morbid curiosity came over him to drink this bitter cup to the dregs.

"They said enough. Besides, you did wrong." To

her mind this was her strongest point. He had done wrong in claiming false powers.

"Don't say anything more," he broke in, advancing quickly toward her. "Just forgive me and we will start all over again."

"And if I don't?"

"I will kill myself."

This gruesome statement thrilled her. Henry Rhodes willing to kill himself for love of her!

"How?" she breathed, fascinated.

"I will shoot myself."

"Henry!" She took a step forward, white frock falling daintily back, and held out her arms.

Some time later, seated on the porch with their heads very close together, Henry did a thing that convinced her even more than ever that he was the most wonderful man in the world.

He drew from his pocket a small square box, opened it, and slipped on her finger a small ring set with a beautiful smoky opal. Where he had got it or when were questions she never asked, so great was her ecstasy.

With thumb and forefinger she turned it on her hand and looked with delighted eyes upon it. She decided at once that it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Henry sat by watching, his all the delight of knowing that she should have to speak first and say something nice. But she did not speak. Pulling her eyes from the smoky opal she turned them upon him. They were very soft.

Leaning slightly toward him, she puckered her lips.

It was on the following Monday that Stephen Engle arrived at the Manse. Peter Rhodes had returned but a few hours before; and he and Anne Rhodes were sitting out in the shade of the house when they saw him come riding up the hill.

He sat on his horse with an easy slouch characteristic of one who has spent much time in the saddle. Even on the horse one could see that he was an unusually large man.

Standing up, he measured six feet and two inches, he weighed two hundred and thirty pounds, and had a back like a flat-hewn pine. He was a perfect specimen of his time and place: a great big man, with a strength almost undreamed, with vast endurance, a kind spirit and a religious disposition.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Brother Engle. Get off and hitch up your horse. Shake hands. Well, well, well,"

"I am back," he answered contentedly, his voice not the deep bass one might expect, but a fine liquid tenor. "Back to my old home."

"We are glad of it. We have missed you."

"Have you?" he asked quickly, wistfully. "I am glad to hear you say that."

It was impossible that the conversation should have gone on long without mention of a protracted meeting. Almost in the middle of a sentence Stephen Engle broke off a narrative of his stay in the south to ask about it.

"We have put it off until you got back," Anne Rhodes answered him. "We wanted you here to help us."

At this he seemed scarcely able to contain his joy. "And we will have it soon?"

"I have been planning for August," Peter Rhodes said. "Since this is a special case we thought we would not have it in the winter, but have it this year in the summer."

"We had better have it before winter," Stephen Engle

replied eagerly. "There will be precious souls to be saved."

"Can't you sing us a song before you go?" Anne Rhodes asked as he was getting ready to leave. "It has been so long since we heard you."

And sitting out in the yard, his whole attitude expressive of great contentment at his return and anticipation of the protracted meeting, he sang "Sweet Rivers of Redeeming Love":

Sweet rivers of redeeming love Lie just before my eyes; Had I the pinions of a dove I'd to those rivers fly.

I'd ride superior to my pain, With joy outstrip the wind; I'd cross bold Jordan's stormy main And leave the world behind.

With voice that was rich and sweet, that vibrated strangely after the manner of the old tunes, he sang the song to the end and arose to depart.

"We will have a wonderful meeting," he predicted.

"I feel sure of it," Peter Rhodes answered.

Little Anne heard the plans for the big meeting in August, and after Stephen Engle's departure slipped up to her mother's side with a request she had long been pondering with dogged but anxious spirit.

"I want new clothes for the big meeting, mother," she said.

"Do you? What do you need?"

"I want a new dress and a pink ribbon for my hair," she said, twisting a string nervously about her finger.

"Is that all?"

For answer she nodded her head quickly but did not look up.

"You can think of nothing else?"

Little Anne drew a deep breath. The pounding of her heart against her thin little breast was plainly visible. "Will I say it?"

"Tell mother."

"I want a pair of fine shoes." And by fine shoes she meant a pair with soft leather and laces instead of the heavy buckled brogans.

"But little girls go barefooted during the summer, don't they?"

The answer was another nod of the head. Little Anne knew that the force of argument was against her. That was why her heart was pounding so: there was no reason why she should have the fine shoes.

"We will see about it, honey."

Little Anne, as if fearful lest even this statement might be recalled, hurried away to plan and dream.

That evening the family was gathered indoors for the devotionals. Peter Rhodes read and commented upon the story of Saul's transformation into Paul. He was very solemn, with an inescapable solemnity that never failed to grip Ben and terrify him.

"And that," he concluded, "is what happens to a man when he has a glimpse of God."

In his prayer which followed, there was this significant reference: "And finally, we pray for the protracted meeting. Open the eyes of the blind and give understanding to such as are of a foolish heart. Baptize us with fire from off the altar; and may there be a great ingathering of the lost!"

The revival had already begun.

Chapter 15

THE PROTRACTED MEETING

NE can never understand the mountain people of West Virginia without some conception of their ubiquitous religiosity. For they are religious. From the preacher who is usually doctor, dentist and undertaker as well, to the ox-driver who slashes his team and hurls curses at them, there is a permeating spiritual force at work that manifests itself in religious expression.

Some have explained it by the physiography of the region: Great sleeping ridges covered by mighty trees; here and there a bare cliff jutting out like a toothless mouth opening into the bowels of the earth; rivers that brood in silence and creeks that wind away to some legendary source; and night over the hills with no light save stars or silver moon, where of summer the whippoorwill and hoot owl and of winter the fox and catamount cry their nature calls to the wide spaces—nature may partly explain the reliance on a mysterious power.

Be that as it may, it is there. The lumberman who sticks his double-bit into a stump and goes off to meeting; the trapper who is astir early and over his circuit in time for the morning service; the daredevil young smartalec who takes his girl with him and sits through the service as if under conviction of sin—all testify to its presence.

The church was always filled even on the regular preaching days, and standing room usually at a pre-

mium; when the Baptist Association had its meetings, they had to be held outdoors to accommodate the vast throngs; when the Methodist Quarterly Conferences were held they lasted two days, and hundreds gathered from miles and camped out during the whole period.

Consequently when it was announced that a protracted meeting should begin in August, the announcement was taken up and passed from lip to lip until it was the topic of general conversation for miles.

Great speculation was indulged in as to the ones who should be saved. Some few had openly announced their intention of forsaking their sins and putting on the new man; there were many in the doubtful list; and no small number of open scoffers. As to which in the second class should be able to "resist" the Spirit, and as to the ones of the third whose resolve should be broken down, there was the greatest curiosity.

"I know one they won't git," Ben heard at the store. "Who?"

"Tate Spraggs. Old Nath Mallory's been after him now a long time. But even if he is his Uncle, Tate won't bite."

"You never kin tell. Wait till ol' Stephen gits a-raging."

Like smoke that clings to a garment and cannot be shaken off, so the spirit of the great revival got in the air and would not be evaded. There was something deep and tangible about it: a certain looking forward to divine and awful mysteries to come.

Little Anne sought out her mother again. "Can I get them?" she asked, like one who wants dreadfully to know yet would rather remain in ignorance than be denied.

"I think so," Anne Rhodes answered unexpectedly.

Little Anne's heart stopped, hung for a moment and

then began to pound against her thin little breast. She searched her mother's face for confirmation of the wonderful news.

"Shoes and all?" she breathed.

"Shoes and all."

Quite unexpectedly, Little Anne began to cry.

But she soon rallied. Her foot was measured for shoes: a little stick was cut just the length from her heel to her big toe. She could not go in person for the shoes; whoever went down in the canoe should take the stick and get her shoes that fitted the measure.

Cloth was purchased for a wonderful dress of blue gingham, and while the ribbon was not bought, assurance was given that it should be in time for the protracted meeting.

The revival consequently acquired a double interest for her: she thought not only of the wonderful spiritual awakening, but of the way she should look in her new clothes. Especially she thought of the shoes, for fine shoes in the summer were a great luxury.

In the latter part of July Uncle Henry Tapps visited the Manse. He had come to engage in prayer for the success of the meeting. Ben hovered near when he saw him, for he liked to hear the old man pray.

His prayers were different; he was known far and near as a man powerful with God. Many were the big meetings he had set on fire by the fiery eloquence of his approach to the Almighty.

After talking for a little on general subjects, the topic of the meeting came up, and very solemnly Peter Rhodes asked that a series of prayers might be held for its success.

He led off, somewhat grandiose and just a little hard in his attitude, and was followed by Anne Rhodes who by her fervent appeal lifted the tension a little higher. Then Uncle Henry began.

He leaned back and with wide-open eyes looked steadfastly toward heaven. He lifted a trembling hand like a pupil seeking the attention of the teacher. Then in a voice that quavered yet vibrated with intense passion, he petitioned God for an outpouring of His power.

He warmed up. On the bare floor of the Manse his heel began to beat a tattoo for all the world like the sound of a woodpecker on a dead limb. His voice rose higher.

"May the fire that fell at Pentecost fall again upon us. Baptize us with the Holy Ghost and send to us the fiery tongues. Touch and tender our hearts with the finger of Thy love. And if there are those that do not know Thee, break their hearts, call them to the mourners' bench to pray for their sins.

"And we pray for Tate Spraggs. Brother Mallory has laid him upon our hearts. Thou hast promised to hear the prayers of thy people where two or three are gathered together. Hear us now!"

The time for the meeting approached. It was decided to hold the services out in the grove just near and a little above the church. It was near enough so the worshipers could go indoors in case of rain, and would more easily accommodate the great crowds that were expected.

At the upper end of the grove a platform was built for the speaker, and on this lanterns should be hung for his convenience. At other places in the grove pine torches should be placed for general illumination.

Peter Rhodes was to be the main preacher, but Brother Hall had offered his services as assistant and had been accepted. He was minister of a congregation farther up the river and much farther back among the mountains.

He was a unique character. His head and face were covered with a tousle of iron gray hair that looked as if it had never been combed. Winter and summer he wore heavy cowhide boots and always had his jeans pants stuffed into them.

His voice was loud and rasping. There was about him a hint of the big wild places where he preached, a strong defiant bearing that went well with the hell fire he delighted to preach.

Uncle Henry Tapps was to lead the prayers at critical moments, and Stephen Engle was to sing. He had a way about him when in the grip of the Spirit. He would start the songs too high for others to reach, and while singing alone would walk to and fro in the aisles clapping his hands and looking heavenward.

This was called "Stephen's raging."

Sunday evening, the eleventh of August, the meeting began. Ben arrived early but found many there before him. Several benches were already filled. On the little platform Brother Hall sat alone. He had slid down in his chair and sat regarding the audience from under shaggy brows.

The lugs of his boots stuck out like small ears, while the tops sagged from long usage. He did not move. With one hand at his cheek and the other deep in his pocket, he sat waiting.

Dusk fell. The lanterns on the platform were lighted and threw a yellow light over the rough pulpit. One by one the pine-knot torches were set afire, and flaring up threw eerie shadows among the trees.

More people arrived. Some walked, and arriving took their places at once; others had ridden horseback, and could be heard talking to their horses as they hitched them to saplings.

Fell silence. The grove was peopled and the worshipers were ready to begin the service. So suddenly that it startled, Brother Hall lifted one of his heavy boots and brought it down on the platform. His loud rasping voice started up a song.

O, it has come down and it will come down, O glory, hallelujah!
I pray the Lord to send it down,
O glory, hallelujah!

But this evoked but little response. The audience was not yet aroused. Usually a week was required to revive the saints and get them where they were not ashamed to own their Lord, but would pray and give testimony and confess their sins. Another week, as a rule, was required to get the sinners under conviction.

"What!" Brother Hall thundered, rising to his feet. "Should not the redeemed of the Lord say so? Oughtn't we to live in heaven every day?"

But though he exhorted and thundered condemnation, though they sang and prayed, there was little movement. Stephen Engle sang one of his beautiful songs, and Uncle Henry led in prayer, but the spirit of the congregation would not rise.

Tate Spraggs was there, and sat in full view beside Alice Arbuthnot. But though she squeezed his arm encouragingly when the invitation was given to sinners to hold up their hands, and though Nathan Mallory looked back at him with appealing eyes, yet he did not move.

"No religion for your Uncle Tate," he whispered to someone who sat beside him.

To Ben the service seemed a failure. "No one was moved any, was there?" he asked ungrammatically, on the way home.

"But it is often that way," Anne Rhodes hastened to assure him, at the same time casting an apprehensive look at her husband who was feeling pretty blue. "It will change soon."

The next night there was a little more life. A few of the saved made fervent prayers, other gave in victorious testimonies, and some went so far as to go back among the sinners and invite them to the mourners' bench. Nathan Mallory was one of these. He approached Tate.

"Tate," he said earnestly, "come and go to the mourners' bench."

"Nope. Guess not, Unk," Tate answered flippantly. Toward the end of the week Peter Rhodes preached a famous sermon from Revelation. "The name of the star is called wormwood," was his text. He drew a picture of an angel standing on high with a star in his hand. The star was thrown through the air and fell like a flaming meteor.

It fell upon waters and turned them to wormwood. The waters represented the lives of men, and the wormwood sorrow and bitterness. There should be crying and wailing; friend should turn against friend; there should follow wars and rumors of war, and then the end.

The pale horse should be ridden no more, for death should be at an end. For the redeemed it should be swallowed up in victory, but for the lost it were but the beginning of an endless death!

At the conclusion of the sermon Stephen Engle arose and sang from "The Divine Call to the Ministry":

Singing Mountains

294

One day as I was walking along a lonesome road, My Savior came unto me and filled my heart with love. He chose me for his watchman to blow the trumpet loud— To cheer the weak believer and to invite the proud.

The cross appeared heavy—I then was in my youth—Oh, how should I be able to speak the words of truth! But Christ said, "I'll go with you, and you may fear no ill. Go blow the gospel trumpet and do your Master's will."

I said unto my Savior, "My talents are but small; Perhaps they will not hear me if on them I do call."
"But if they will not hear you, with you it shall go well; Go blow the gospel trumpet while they go down to hell."

Uncle Henry then led in prayer, looking open-eyed into heaven and pattering with his heel. Unlike the first service, his periods were now punctuated with cries of "Grant, Lord!" "Amen," and "Yea, yea!" from the congregation. The revival was gaining ground.

Some such thought must have come to Brother Hall, for bringing down his foot on the platform he struck up,

Pray on, pray on, for we're gaining ground, O glory, hallelujah! For the love of God is a-coming down, O glory, hallelujah!

The congregation joined him with a will, and together they sang another verse:

If you want to see old Satan pout, O glory, hallelujah! Just let the Christians raise the shout, O glory, hallelujah!

Nathan Mallory thought the time auspicious, and again sought out Tate where he slouched in his seat beside Alice.

"Has the Lord moved you yet, Tate?" he asked.

"Not yet, Unk," Tate grinned.

Mallory compressed his lips and went back up front. Sunday the meeting was to last all day. By hundreds the crowds arrived early, bringing with them provisions for a great picnic dinner.

At the morning service Peter Rhodes was at his best. Now, for the first time during the meeting, as he preached he began to walk back and to, back and to across the pulpit, like a caged panther seeking escape.

He was seeking to give to the congregation the power that was pent up within him. Eloquence flowed from him. His eyes, slightly staring, looked down his finger as over a gun barrel as he pointed it accusingly toward the unsaved.

First there were whimperings such as come from a dog when he is straining at the leash. Some began to rock to and fro, hands clasped before them. Brother Hall's shaggy head fell forward on his hands as he began to pray aloud.

Stephen Engle began to clasp and unclasp his hands. His face flushed with beatific joy. At the close of the sermon Peter Rhodes nodded to him and he sprang to his feet and began.

"Stephen's raging!" was passed from lip to lip on the outskirts of the great crowd. The throng pressed closer.

He walked up and down the aisle between the benches for a moment without opening his mouth. He simply waved his arms. Then he halted, and looking up at the great trees that towered above, held up his hand for attention.

No one moved. There was absolute silence. In a voice pitched incredibly high, but which was sweet and

soft as the long-drawn minor of a Stradivarius, he sang his favorite song.

'Tis low down in that beautiful valley Where love crowns the meek and the lowly; Where no storms of envy or folly Can ere roll their billows again.

The meek soul in humble subjection Shall there find unshaken protection, Where soft gales of cheering reflection The mind soothe from sorrow and pain!

This low vale is free from contention, Where no soul can dream of dissension; Where no wiles of evil intention Can find a place in those regions of peace. 'Tis there, there the Lord will deliver, And souls drink of that beautiful river, Where peace flows forever and ever, And love and joy forever increase!

In the afternoon was the testimony meeting, when in chaste and humble language the saved told of the goodness of the Lord. There was no hesitance now; no reluctance to speak or sing or pray. A mellow feeling of good will ran through the whole assemblage, and those who had come to scoff went away ashamed.

The lanterns on the platform were filled and the torches put in readiness for the evening service. It began "at early lamplighting," or just following the afterglow that streaked the sky with a wonderful sunset.

A great many songs were sung at first, sung without books or organ, but sung without faltering. Then as darkness increased and crowd pressed closer, the other features of the service were taken up.

When Peter Rhodes announced his subject there was a sensible narrowing of the field of attention. He was

to preach on everlasting punishment, and all were desirous of hearing what he had to say. It only need be said that they believed in hell and heaven, salvation and damnation; an angry God that could be as pitiless as stone; and also in the need of penitence and forgiveness, to understand that when the minister discussed everlasting punishment his was a vital theme.

The saved were without fear, glorying in the salvation that saved them from such a dreadful doom. Many of the hardened sinners were as yet unawakened and heard the subject announced with indifferent smiles. But others of their number were worn raw by the emotional pressure of the meetings, and these heard the subject with almost physical pain.

"For their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched," were the words of his text, and from them he proceeded to draw a picture of eternity. The illustration of the sparrow and the grains of sand was used and with such effect that eternity stretched out as an interminable oppressive period as baffling as it was inescapable.

And for the wicked the eternal period was filled with torment. The fire was never quenched. With graphic realism he drew a picture of men fighting a forest fire, their hands blistered and their lungs torn by the smoke. Did they not remember how they rushed for the air when they could endure no more? and how cool and soothing the air was when they panted it in? But in hell there would be no escape: shut in with the everlasting fire they must gasp and tear themselves forever.

A groan was heard, deep-drawn and agonized. A sinner had pictured himself as lost and shut up in such an eternity. Peter Rhodes stopped.

"God is speaking," he announced solemnly. "Shall we heed his voice before it is forever too late?"

The silence that followed was electric. The yellow lanterns threw the face of the speaker into wavering relief; the sputtering torches shed a sulphuric light upon the audience and threw far the shadows of the silent trees.

The groan was repeated, followed by a commotion in the rear of the audience. A man struggled to his feet, wavered for an instant looking about him, a strange wild light in his eyes.

"Brothers, brothers!" he began hoarsely. "I am lost, lost for all eternity. Repent ye while it is yet day. For I——" he stopped, straightened and dashed away into the forest, shouting, "Lost, lost."

"It is the judgment of Almighty God," Brother Hall thundered.

"Lost, lost," floated back from the forest.

Stephen Engle started up a song:

I saw a youth the other day Just in his bloom—he looked so gay! But he trifled all his time away, And dropped into eternity, It is awful, awful!

The corpse was laid beneath the ground, With friends and loved ones weeping round; With aching heart and troubled mind To think his soul was in hell confined, It is awful, awful!

"'Now is the accepted time,'" Peter Rhodes chanted.
"'Behold, now is the day of salvation.' 'And the spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.'"

The storm broke. Like the increasing volume of a mighty organ that beats down individuality and fairly smothers the soul in its content, so the irresistible emotion of the hour got hold of men's hearts and broke down hesitation, leading them captive to its sway.

Men who had followed him came back leading the man who had rushed away into the forest. He fell prostrate at the mourners' bench praying for mercy.

Peter Rhodes gave the call for others to follow. There was a veritable stampede in response. Men crowded against each other to get to shake his hand, and then knelt at the altar to pray.

Nathan Mallory scanned the face of each man, hoping to see Tate coming forward. But he did not come. Mallory made his way back through the press and found him sitting calmly on a bench regarding all with a superior smile.

"Tate, has God spoken to you yet?" Mallory asked anxiously.

"Not yet, Unk," he replied with a grin.

Mallory shut his jaws and walked away. There was a hard glint in his eyes.

The meeting that night was long remembered at Barren Rocks: Peter Rhodes standing at the altar and welcoming sinners while he called aloud for others to come; Brother Hall adding his word of invitation when he was not wrestling with God for the salvation of some lost man; Stephen Engle raging, walking up and down and singing at the top of his voice; and old Uncle Henry Tapps kneeling at the altar and praying open-eyed for an outpouring of the Holy Ghost!

Ben, having long looked forward to the revival as an occasion of thrilling excitement, now found himself, as a spectator and auditor at this service, very strangely

Singing Mountains

800

disturbed. No longer was his dominant emotion pure excitement.

Something deeper stirred within. He felt there was something about all this that reached down to the fundaments of his being and called forth new and disturbing emotions.

"Are there others that will come?" Ben recognized his father's voice.

After all, why not? Why not go up there and pray for pardon and forgiveness of sin? But what sin had he committed? He did not know. Only, he knew all was not well. A great desire came over him to rush up to the mourners' bench, and surrender.

He glanced about him to see whether he were observed. With relief he saw that he was not. He swallowed the lump that had arisen in his throat and stole out where he might be alone. . . .

Chapter 16

DEEP CALLETH UNTO DEEP

BUT, mother, I want them now." Little Anne was standing in the doorway, a worried look on her face.

"They will be here soon," her mother assured her.

"But the meeting is half over and they are not here yet."

"You can wear your new dress without them."

"But I want my shoes!" she said, almost in tears.

"The boat is late, but it may get here to-day."

"I wish Samuel Aked had steered it."

"He had to stay for the meeting. Bill Tools will get it back, all right. Just have patience."

Bill Tools had taken the boat to Charleston, and was long overdue. Little Anne, new dress all ready and wonderful pink ribbon tied in a beautiful bow, was waiting only for her shoes to complete her outfit.

She went back into her room to try on the dress for more than the hundredth time. It was wonderful. But with stockings and shoes—fine shoes—it would be even more wonderful. Even as she pondered, her mother's voice called to her.

"Here comes Bill now with a package."

Little Anne went nearly wild. So excited was she that she did not know just exactly what she did do. She had eyes only for the package, an oblong affair tied with white twine. Tearing it open she lifted the layer of tissue paper and uncovered a pair of small soft shoes with thin soles and long black laces. She looked at them a moment entranced, then snatched them up and hugged them.

"Mother!" she cried in ecstasy, "look at them!"

Anne Rhodes first looked in pure pleasure, then her eyes widened. "Let me see them," she said suddenly.

She held one up before her and regarded it dubiously. Then she cast a quick glance at Little Anne's bare feet. "Get your stockings, honey, and try them on."

Little Anne darted into the room and came back with her stockings. She put one on and essayed to slip her foot into the shoe. But it would not go on; the shoes were too small: Bill Tools had had an accident and unawares had broken an inch off the little stick.

"But, mother, I must get them on."

"I am afraid you can't, honey."

"I must, I must!" she cried, pulling at them.

"Maybe you will have to give them up," Anne Rhodes said haltingly.

"Give them up!" She straightened her body and the heart in her thin little breast stopped, then raced on again. She gathered up the shoes and hugged them to her breast as if they were a doll needing protection. "I can't, mother! O, I can't!"

Anne Rhodes looked at her for an instant. Then, "You are mother's little woman," she said softly.

Little Anne put the shoes back in the box and covered them with the soft paper, even as she had once buried a broken doll; but the shoes could not be dug up again. She sought her mother's breast.

The service at the meeting house began that night at early lamp lighting. The crowd was large, news of the meeting of the previous night having spread far and near.

The saints being by this time fully aroused, there was concerted effort among them to reach out after the unsaved. By bands and singly they went among them urging them to repentance.

Nathan Mallory, the hard glint still in his eyes, was searching the throng for Tate. He found him at last, serene in the company of scoffers. It was during a season of prayer that he espied him: Tate sat with hands to his face looking out between his fingers. The prayer over, Mallory approached him. Tate saw him coming and winked at those about him.

"Tate, come to-night. Give your heart to Jesus!"

"Guess not, Unk," Tate answered, again winking about him.

Nathan Mallory's great figure stiffened. His hands clasped and unclasped convulsively. The hard look glinted in his eyes; his breath came unevenly.

Like a flash he shot out a hand and wound his fingers in the collar of Tate's coat. Then he doubled up the great hairy fist of his other hand and shook it under Tate's nose.

"Tate," he said with ominous restraint, "if God Almighty can't fetch ye, your old Uncle can!"

He jerked Tate off his seat as if he had been an offensive kitten, and with eyes on the preacher's face started to drag him toward the mourners' bench.

Arrived there he lifted him clear off the ground and set him down hard. "Now, damn you," he said, "pray God Almighty to have mercy on your worthless soul!"

Tate's was the first conversion of the more than two hundred that followed, and because of the unusual circumstances surrounding it, directly paved the way for the great Friday night meeting that shall ever remain in the memory of Barren Rocks. The church people had got beyond the mere cordial stage. They were in a condition of violent religious excitement. The emotion of a few had proved contagious and spread to all: the united church had openly come to the help of the Lord against the mighty.

Tate Spraggs had joined this number and now stood side by side with the older brethren in his unequivocal witnessing for the Master. In a sense his conversion had taken away the mainstay of the wicked; his forsaking of their ranks had left them disorganized and unprepared.

The leaders of the revival knew his, and when they assembled on Friday night under the yellow light of the torches they were at white heat of enthusiasm, determined to make a concerted attack upon the strongholds of Satan.

Breaking all precedent in testifying rather than praying, hardly had the service started when Uncle Henry Tapps arose to give an account of a vision he had had the previous night.

Four of his children were dead, and buried according to custom in a little grove on his own farm. Almost daily he went out to visit the graves and there commune with his children who were not.

The previous night he had gone out and fallen across the grave of the eldest who had always seemed to love him most. As he lay there he heard strains of wonderful music in the air above him, and looking up saw a heavenly choir standing in a circle and singing a triumphant song.

And in the center of the circle, with a crown of gold set with many stars upon her head and with arms outstretched toward him, was his eldest one who had loved him most.

"And, Christian friends," he concluded, "it will not be

long until I join her in the skies. O, my little Mary, my little Mary!" He fell sobbing to the ground.

Stephen Engle sang:

Come all ye blood bought purchase, On you I call to-day: Fall at the feet of Jesus And there begin to pray; Sinners, if you refuse him I'll bid you all farewell, And blow the gospel trumpet While you go down to hell.

Behold the blood of Jesus
Shed on Mount Calvary!
Look up by faith and view him,
And he will set you free.
But if you do refuse him
And disobey your Lord,
I'll blow the gospel trumpet
And clear me of your blood!

Peter Rhodes arose to preach, his whole attitude changed. No longer was he the mouthpiece of an angry God; he was the humble messenger of the heavenly father. He took his text from Revelation: To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

"'Like as a father pitieth his children," he began, "'so the Lord pitieth them that fear him!" Then he proceeded to speak to them of the heavenly father who stood at the battlements of heaven and sent across the wide distance an infinite love that it might go down and soothe and bind the broken hearts of men.

Ben had gone to the service without having reached a decision, and sat well back in the audience listening to his father's words. He had expected condemnation, and this he could have heard with indifference. But the soft new emotion of the sermon caught him unprepared. The lump again arose in his throat; something deep within him—something that filled him with vague sadness seemed to stir.

Anne Rhodes, with face transfigured by the deep humanity of the sermon, arose at its conclusion to testify of her saving knowledge of the cross, but broke down. She could not continue. For a moment she sat and cried into her handkerchief, then suddenly sprang up and began to shout.

At this the very foundations of Ben's universe were shaken. The solid basis of sensory experience on which he had lived was rocked to and fro and he found himself an emotional being tossed hither and yon by mighty waves of feeling which he could not fathom and whose existence he had never dreamed.

An event with so many separate features as were contained in the meeting that night is difficult to picture, especially since the divers elements all took place at the same time. Because, when one talked the others did not remain silent. The cries of the penitent mingled with the exhortations of the preachers; the songs of triumph that burst from Stephen Engle's lips as he raged back and to were heard above the quavering but impassioned prayers of Uncle Henry Tapps.

Some appreciation of the service as a whole might be had if one should imagine the shouts of victory that escaped those who no longer could sit still but who ran to and fro clapping their hands, and the importunate prayers of those who labored with the unsaved at the mourners' bench, and especially the new high tide reached by the emotion when of a sudden with beaming countenance

one of these mourners would jump to his feet and add his voice to the praises of the redeemed.

Stephen Engle led the congregation in song, and throughout the voice of Peter Rhodes was heard in appeal to the sinners to accept salvation while it was yet day! Powerful in prayer and never more eloquent than now, Uncle Henry Tapps continued to pray God for a second Pentecost.

With a shout of triumph and in a voice no other could reach, Stephen Engle began anew his raging and then broke into song:

> I saw a weary traveler, His feet were tired and worn; But he sang a song of victory Of battles fought and won!

O! crowns of victory, crowns of glory, Crowns of victory we shall wear. O! crowns of victory, crowns of glory, Crowns of victory we shall wear!

Have you ever stood on mountain and heard the rumble and roar of the storm winds as they swept through the grim forests below? Then you can imagine the sound as the hundreds who were present at the service that night swung into the chorus of this song. The effect was irresistible.

At its conclusion Ben was shaking like a leaf. But through it all a feeling of shame was upon him: he did not want to seem so easily taken off his feet. He searched eagerly in the audience for Henry. Henry would not be so emotional, not he! Ben wanted to catch his eye and show him that he, too, was unmoved.

But when he finally saw Henry he was sitting with face

Singing Mountains

808

in hands and shaken by sobs he made no effort to control. Poor Ben! His one last support was swept away.

'Tis there those who by storms have been driven Shall moor their bark in that beautiful haven, And there bask in the sunshine of heaven, And triumph in Emmanuel's name. O there, there in yonder bright glory We'll shout and sing and tell the glad story, And when we have all crossed old Jordan over We'll sing hallelujah to God and the Lamb!

No one but Stephen Engle could sing the song like that. Of a sudden Ben's resistance broke down. Words rushed through his mind, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in!" He understood their meaning now: he was opening the gates of his soul to the play of this new influence and a power not his own had taken possession of him.

He fairly rushed for the altar and threw himself upon it. Anne Rhodes saw and understood: Ben was seeking salvation; her prayers had been answered! With a prayer of thanksgiving she hurried to his side. Peter Rhodes met her at the mourners' bench and they clasped hands above him.

"The boy's come!" Stephen Engle shouted as he approached them. He got a hand of each in his own and led anew in song:

My latest sun is sinking fast, My race is nearly run; My strongest trials now are past, My triumph has begun.

Deep Calleth Unto Deep

809

O, come angel band!
Come and around me stand!
O, bear me away on your snowy wings
To my immortal home.

The congregation repeated the chorus with a sound as of many waters or as of mighty thunderings:

O, come angel band! Come and around me stand! O, bear me away on your snowy wings To my immortal home!

And then, in Ben's heart, deep called unto deep.

Chapter 17

BEN AND HENRY

BEN sat down on the bald point of the hill that overlooked the old Baptist Manse. Came to him the indistinct plaint of the river shoals below Little Creek. The air was heavy with the fragrance that comes of virgin soil and forest trees in autumn.

Up near the old Hingle place a cow-bell tinkled.

It was evening. Like a great red circular saw the sun had rolled behind Crow Point a few hours since. Darkness had fallen: the mysterious brooding darkness that hints of the old primordial jungle life.

A katydid came out nearby and the darkness vibrated with its shrill note. From the direction of Johnson's Gap floated the weird question-call of the mountaineer:

"A-way-ee-he-e-e!"

Ben hugged his knees in his arms. He made out the dim outline of Buzzard mountain, and vaguer still the cold solemn ribs of Buzzard Roost. He took in his breath sharply, then expelled it and his head fell forward on his knees.

He sobbed brokenly.

There was no occasion for it. It was just his reaction toward life. He was growing up, was Ben, and sometimes when he was out this way, the night affected him so. It was not that he was disappointed, or that he was dissatisfied. Neither was he lonely—quite.

But when evening came on and all the world was si-

lent; when darkness settled down like a mantle and shut out the sky; when this happened, there were vague stirrings within him that sounded the deeps of his nature and filled him with a formless sorrow.

In some similar manner, according to that strange law whereby the child in his development lives again the history of the race, some old paleolithic man might have climbed a mountain and dreamed of a past that he had never known. And as he dreamed his dream, he also must have sobbed with the vague and formless sorrow of the unknown.

For Ben was growing up and his soul was shaken by the nameless destiny he felt stirring within him. New adolescent emotions crowded him; he no longer felt the serenity that was once his. Even himself he could not now trust.

The revival had tended even more to make him uneasy and self-conscious. The wonderful experience that had come to him but a month before had been too mysterious to be comfortable. It made him uneasy. This being he had called himself had suddenly appeared too mysterious for his understanding.

He was torn by conflicting emotions. Now the impulse to heroism was strong upon him, and under its influence he planned marvelously; but it might be followed by a desire to destroy, or by a strange craving for human companionship which Henry could not satisfy.

He felt out of place with Grouchie McRand and Ed Rainey or any of the boys he had gone with. Had he but known it, they felt out of place with him, for they likewise were growing up and were tossed about by their emotions. But he did not know. It is a characteristic of the adolescent that he conceive of his experiences as peculiar to himself.

812 Singing Mountains

He lifted his head now, and again was sensitive to the night. September was hurrying to a close; autumn chill was in the air. His mother's voice came to him from the house; she was singing.

And now we are aged and gray, Maggie, With the trials of life nearly done; Let us sing of the days that are gone, Maggie, When you and I were young.

Again the vague formless sorrow stirred within him. His mother's voice continued:

They say we are aged and gray, Maggie, As spray by the white breakers flung; But to me you're as fair as you were, Maggie, When you and I were young.

September had reached its close and October had turned the woods to gold when, descending one afternoon from Crow Point whither he had gone to look away and dream, Ben came upon a scene in the front yard for which he was entirely unprepared.

"But the boat doesn't start to-day, does it?" Peter Rhodes was asking Henry.

The latter stood rather forlornly in the center of the yard with his father facing him from near the doorway. Anne Rhodes sat on a chair against the wall, her face in her apron. Little Anne was leaning against her, arms twined about her neck. Near the gate but facing Johnson's Gap, Jennie stood blinking back the tears. Ben's arrival was scarcely noticed.

"It goes this evening," Henry answered. "They want to get a few miles down to-night."

"But, son, I don't like to see you go away like this."
"Don't go," Anne Rhodes sobbed brokenly.

Ben and Henry

"But I must go," Henry said, himself near breaking. "It is a good chance. He will let me read law in his office until I can pass my examinations and be admitted to the bar. It's too good a chance to miss."

"I know Judge Willmott personally," Peter Rhodes agreed. "He will do the right thing."

"And it's not very often a chance like this comes, now is it?" Henry appealed to him.

"No, I guess not," he conceded. "Still---"

"Are you going away, Henry?" Ben asked with widening eyes.

"I guess so, Ben." Henry's voice came nearer breaking now. Perhaps some of the brother-love that Ben felt at the moment moved him also.

"But you would be leaving us all—and Jennie, too," Ben began in remonstrance.

At mention of her name, Jennie drooped. She looked a forlorn and pathetic figure as she stood there. As ever with woman, she was now concealing her own desires and awaiting the decision of the man she loved.

"Good-by, mother," Henry said suddenly, approaching her.

For one moment she lifted her eyes to his face. "Goodby, son," she said, and again dropped her head into her apron.

Peter Rhodes held out his hand and took Henry's in a grip that was like iron. "My boy," he said steadily, "good-by. I am sure you will be a man. You couldn't be anything else. God bless you."

Ben was too stunned to say good-by, as was also Little Anne. They merely followed him with their eyes as he walked down the hill. When he reached the bars, he turned, looked back, and waved his hand. Then he was gone.

814 Singing Mountains

Ben slipped out to the point whence he could see the landing down by the old Manse. A little later he was joined by Anne Rhodes; and the two stood there together, waiting.

The long, heavy canoe was at the landing; the men were moving about. Samuel Aked was to steer. Soon the two from the point saw Henry and Jennie emerge from the path and go toward the bank.

The men got into the boat, Henry set his telescope in the bottom and took a seat near the stern, Bill Tools pushed off, and the long narrow bow swung out and pointed toward the shoals.

The canoe slid over the shoals, passed the sheer side of old Buzzard Roost, turned the bend and was swallowed up between the hills.

Jennie followed it with her eyes until it was out of sight. Then she turned her face for an instant up toward the point where Anne Rhodes and Ben still stood, as if she would impress the scene on her memory. With dragging step and drooping body she started for the ridge and home.

Even the next day Ben found out that he should miss Henry dreadfully. Home seemed unbearably silent and lonesome. Everywhere was the sense of something lacking.

Peter Rhodes walked the floor and whistled in the distracting minor he always assumed when blue. Even Little Anne sang frequently a song that never failed to disturb Ben:

When the curtains of night are pinned back by the stars And the beautiful moon leaps the skies, And the dewdrops of heaven are kissing the rose, It is then that my memory flies As if on the wings of some beautiful dove,



Ben and Henry

815

To haste with the message it bears; To bring you a kiss of affection and say, "I'll remember you love, in my prayers."

Ben slipped away alone and found his old retreat on Crow Point. He looked down the river and visualized Henry as he went toward Charleston. He likewise should leave some day, should go out into the world and make a name for himself.

He couldn't stay here much longer, that was sure. He and Henry had climbed the very trees that stood about him, and now Henry was gone; they had fished together in creek and river; had gone to church side by side. They had picked berries, gone to school, and dug "sang," and always together. Now Henry was gone. He, Ben, should have to do everything by himself now. . . . No, he couldn't stay at Barren Rocks much longer. . . .

His eye was caught by a spot of blue against the path far down the hill. He looked again and a warm feeling stirred within him.

It was Essie. She was coming up to see Little Anne, so she would say when she arrived. But Ben knew better! He followed her with kindling eyes. She walked so serenely: even at that distance he could discern the dainty carriage; he imagined the soft oval face and the sweet voice.

He waited till she got almost to the lower bars, then slipped from his rendezvous and went to meet her. She saw him coming and waved her hand gaily.

"Hello, Ben," she greeted him.

"Hello, Essie," he answered, going up to her. "I'm glad you came. I was lonesome."

"For Henry?" she asked archly.

"For you!"

They smiled into each other's eyes.

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